

This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`

Library
of the
University of Wisconsin



Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

EXPOSITIONS OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

Digitized by Google

Expositions of Holy Scripture

BY THE

REV. ALEXANDER MACLAREN, D.D., Litt.D.

A Complete Commentary on the Bible in Thirty Volumes, to be published in Annual Series of Six Volumes.

"Dr. Alexander Maclaren is the Prince of Expositors, and the present idea of gathering the cream of his expository genius is a fitting climax to his splendid contributions to Scripture Exposition."

FIRST SERIES, SIX VOLUMES, COMPRISING:

The Book of Genesis

The Prophecies of Isaiah

The Prophecies of Isaiah (Chapters XLIX-LXVI), and the Prophecies of Jeremiah

The Gospel of St. Matthew

(Three Volumes)

"It is a matter for deep satisfaction that DR. MACLAREN'S Expositions are to be collected and arranged in permanent form. Unless we are very much mistaken, they will have a permanent place in the library alike of thoughtful laymen and of preachers generally."—*British Weekly.*

Dr. Alexander Maclaren's incomparable position as the Prince of Expositors has for more than a generation been recognized throughout the English-speaking world. He holds an unchallenged position and it is believed that this series, embodying as it does the treasure store of Dr. Maclaren's life work, will be found of priceless value by preachers, teachers, and readers of the Bible generally.

NEW YORK: A. C. ARMSTRONG & SON

Digitized by Google

THE
BOOK OF GENESIS

BY

ALEXANDER MACLAREN
D.D., LITT.D.

NEW YORK
A. C. ARMSTRONG AND SON
3 & 5 WEST EIGHTEENTH STREET
LONDON: HODDER AND STOUGHTON
MCMVI

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

110204

CBkN
M22

CONTENTS

PAGE

THE VISION OF CREATION (Genesis i. 26—ii. 3) . . 1

HOW SIN CAME IN (Genesis iii. 1-15) 5

EDEN LOST AND RESTORED (Genesis iii. 24; Revelation xxii. 14) 10

THE GROWTH AND POWER OF SIN (Genesis iv. 3-16) . 14

WHAT CROUCHES AT THE DOOR (Genesis iv. 7, R.V.) . 22

WITH, BEFORE, AFTER (Genesis v. 22; Genesis xvii. 1; Deuteronomy xiii. 4) 32

THE COURSE AND CROWN OF A DEVOUT LIFE (Genesis v. 24) 38

THE SAINT AMONG SINNERS (Genesis vi. 9-22) . . 48

'CLEAR SHINING AFTER RAIN' (Genesis viii. 1-22) . . 55

THE SIGN FOR MAN AND THE REMEMBRANCER FOR GOD (Genesis ix. 8-17) 60

Digitized by Google

PAGE

AN EXAMPLE OF FAITH (Genesis xii. 1-9) . . . 66

ABRAM AND THE LIFE OF FAITH 73

GOING FORTH (Genesis xii. 5) 77

COMING IN 80

THE MAN OF FAITH (Genesis xii. 6, 7) . . . 82

LIFE IN CANAAN (Genesis xii. 8) 84

THE IMPORTANCE OF A CHOICE (Genesis xiii. 1-13) . . 85

ABRAM THE HEBREW (Genesis xiv. 13) . . . 93

GOD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAM (Genesis xv. 5-18) . . 101

THE WORD THAT SCATTERS FEAR (Genesis xv. 1) . . 111

FAITH AND RIGHTEOUSNESS (Genesis xv. 6) . . 116

WAITING FAITH REWARDED AND STRENGTHENED BY NEW REVELATIONS (Genesis xvii. 1-9) . . . 117

A PETULANT WISH (Genesis xvii. 18) . . . 123

'BECAUSE OF HIS IMPORTUNITY' (Genesis xviii. 16-33) . 129

Digitized by Google

PAGE

THE INTERCOURSE OF GOD AND HIS FRIEND . . 134

THE SWIFT DESTROYER (Genesis xix. 15-26) . . 142

FAITH TESTED AND CROWNED (Genesis xxii. 1-14) . . 152

THE CROWNING TEST AND TRIUMPH OF FAITH . . 161

JEHOVAH-JIREH (Genesis xxii. 14) 165

GUIDANCE IN THE WAY (Genesis xxiv. 27) . . . 173

THE DEATH OF ABRAHAM (Genesis xxv. 8) . . 180

A BAD BARGAIN (Genesis xxv. 27-34) . . . 192

POTTAGE *versus* BIRTHRIGHT (Genesis xxv. 34) . . 198

THE FIRST APOSTLE OF PEACE AT ANY PRICE (Genesis xxvi. 12-25) 201

THE HEAVENLY PATHWAY AND THE EARTHLY HEART (Genesis xxviii. 10-22) 206

MAHANAIM: THE TWO CAMPS (Genesis xxxii. 1, . . 214

THE TWOFOLD WRESTLE—GOD'S WITH JACOB AND JACOB'S WITH GOD (Genesis xxxii. 9-12) . . . 222

A FORGOTTEN VOW (Genesis xxxv. 1) . . . 233

Digitized by Google

PAGE

THE TRIALS AND VISIONS OF DEVOUT YOUTH (Genesis xxxvii. 1-11) 234

MAN'S PASSIONS AND GOD'S PURPOSE (Genesis xxxvii. 23-36) 240

GOODNESS IN A DUNGEON (Genesis xl. 1-15) . . 248

JOSEPH, THE PRIME MINISTER (Genesis xli. 38-48) . . 253

RECOGNITION AND RECONCILIATION (Genesis xlv. 1-15) . 260

JOSEPH, THE PARDONER AND PRESERVER . . . 268

GROWTH BY TRANSPLANTING (Genesis xlvii. 1-12) . . 272

TWO RETROSPECTS OF ONE LIFE (Genesis xlvii. 9; Genesis xlviii. 15, 16) 279

'THE HANDS OF THE MIGHTY GOD OF JACOB' (Genesis xlix. 23, 24) 286

THE SHEPHERD, THE STONE OF ISRAEL (Genesis xlix. 24) . 295

A CALM EVENING, PROMISING A BRIGHT MORNING (Genesis l. 14-26) 305

JOSEPH'S FAITH (Genesis l. 25) 311

A COFFIN IN EGYPT (Genesis l. 26) 328

Digitized by Google

THE VISION OF CREATION

'And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in His own image: in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them. And God blessed them: and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat. And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat: and it was so. And God saw every thing that He had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.

'Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had made; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it; because that in it He had rested from all His work which God created and made.'—GENESIS i. 26—ii. 3.

WE are not to look to Genesis for a scientific cosmogony, and are not to be disturbed by physicists' criticisms on it as such. Its purpose is quite another, and far more important; namely, to imprint deep and ineffaceable the conviction that the one God created all things. Nor must it be forgotten that this vision of creation was given to people ignorant of natural science, and prone to fall back into surrounding idolatry. The comparison of the creation narratives in Genesis with the cuneiform tablets, with which they evidently are most closely connected, has for its most important result the demonstration of the infinite elevation above their monstrosities and puerilities, of this solemn, steadfast attribution of the creative act to the one God. Here we can only draw

Digitized by Google

out in brief the main points which the narrative brings into prominence.

1. The revelation which it gives is the truth, obscured to all other men when it was given, that one God 'in the beginning created the heaven and the earth.' That solemn utterance is the keynote of the whole. The rest but expands it. It was a challenge and a denial for all the beliefs of the nations, the truth of which Israel was the champion and missionary. It swept the heavens and earth clear of the crowd of gods, and showed the One enthroned above, and operative in, all things. We can scarcely estimate the grandeur, the emancipating power, the all-uniting force, of that utterance. It is a worn commonplace to us. It was a strange, thrilling novelty when it was written at the head of this narrative. *Then* it was in sharp opposition to beliefs that have long been dead to us; but it is still a protest against some living errors. Physical science has not spoken the final word when it has shown us how things came to be as they are. There remains the deeper question, What, or who, originated and guided the processes? And the only answer is the ancient declaration, 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.'

2. The record is as emphatic and as unique in its teaching as to the mode of creation: 'God said . . . and it was so.' That lifts us above all the poor childish myths of the nations, some of them disgusting, many of them absurd, all of them unworthy. There was no other agency than the putting forth of the divine will. The speech of God is but a symbol of the flashing forth of His will. To us Christians the antique phrase suggests a fulness of meaning not

Digitized by Google

inherent in it, for we have learned to believe that 'all things were made by Him' whose name is 'The Word of God'; but, apart from that, the representation here is sublime. 'He spake, and it was done'; that is the sign-manual of Deity.

3. The completeness of creation is emphasised. We note, not only the recurrent 'and it was so,' which declares the perfect correspondence of the result with the divine intention, but also the recurring 'God saw that it was good.' His ideals are always realised. The divine artist never finds that the embodiment of His thought falls short of His thought.

> 'What act is all its thought had been?
> What will but felt the fleshly screen?'

But He has no hindrances nor incompletenesses in His creative work, and the very sabbath rest with which the narrative closes symbolises, not His need of repose, but His perfect accomplishment of His purpose. God ceases from His works because 'the works were finished,' and He saw that all was very good.

4. The progressiveness of the creative process is brought into strong relief. The work of the first four days is the preparation of the dwelling-place for the living creatures who are afterwards created to inhabit it. How far the details of these days' work coincide with the order as science has made it out, we are not careful to ask here. The primeval chaos, the separation of the waters above from the waters beneath, the emergence of the land, the beginning of vegetation there, the shining out of the sun as the dense mists cleared, all find confirmation even in modern theories of evolution. But the intention of the whole is much rather to teach that, though the simple utterance of

Digitized by Google

the divine will was the agent of creation, the manner of it was not a sudden calling of the world, as men know it, into being, but majestic, slow advance by stages, each of which rested on the preceding. To apply the old distinction between justification and sanctification, creation was a work, not an act. The Divine Workman, who is always patient, worked slowly then as He does now. Not at a leap, but by deliberate steps, the divine ideal attains realisation.

5. The creation of living creatures on the fourth and fifth days is so arranged as to lead up to the creation of man as the climax. On the fifth day sea and air are peopled, and their denizens 'blessed,' for the equal divine love holds every living thing to its heart. On the sixth day the earth is replenished with living creatures. Then, last of all, comes man, the apex of creation. Obviously the purpose of the whole is to concentrate the light on man; and it is a matter of no importance whether the narrative is correct according to zoology, or not. What it says is that God made all the universe, that He prepared the earth for the delight of living creatures, that the happy birds that soar and sing, and the dumb creatures that move through the paths of the seas, and the beasts of the earth, are all His creating, and that man is linked to them, being made on the same day as the latter, and by the same word, but that between man and them all there is a gulf, since he is made in the divine image. That image implies personality, the consciousness of self, the power to say 'I,' as well as purity. The transition from the work of the first four days to that of creating living things must have had a break. No theory has been able to bridge the

Digitized by Google

chasm without admitting a divine act introducing the new element of life, and none has been able to bridge the gulf between the animal and human consciousness without admitting a divine act introducing 'the image of God' into the nature common to animal and man. Three facts as to humanity are thrown up into prominence: its possession of the image of God, the equality and eternal interdependence of the sexes, and the lordship over all creatures. Mark especially the remarkable wording of verse 27: 'created He *him*; male and female created He *them*.' So 'neither is the woman without the man, nor the man without the woman.' Each is maimed apart from the other. Both stand side by side, on one level before God. The germ of the most 'advanced' doctrines of the relations of the sexes is hidden here.

HOW SIN CAME IN

'Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know, that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened; and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat; and gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig-leaves together, and made themselves aprons. And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden. And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou? And he said, I heard Thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself. And He said, Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat? And the man said, The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. And the Lord God said unto the woman, What is this that thou hast done? and the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat. And the Lord God said unto the

Digitized by Google

serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field: upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life. And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed: it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.'—GENESIS iii. 1-15.

IT is no part of my purpose to enter on the critical questions connected with the story of 'the fall.' Whether it is a legend, purified and elevated, or not, is of less consequence than what is its moral and religious significance, and that significance is unaffected by the answer to the former question. The story presupposes that primitive man was in a state of ignorant innocence, not of intellectual or moral perfection, and it tells how that ignorant innocence came to pass into conscious sin. What are the stages of the transition?

1. There is the presentation of inducement to evil. The law to which Adam is to be obedient is in the simplest form. There is restriction. 'Thou shalt not' is the first form of law, and it is a form congruous with the undeveloped, though as yet innocent, nature ascribed to him. The conception of duty is present, though in a very rudimentary shape. An innocent being may be aware of limitations, though as yet not 'knowing good and evil.' With deep truth the story represents the first suggestion of disobedience as presented from without. No doubt, it might have by degrees arisen from within, but the thought that it was imported from another sphere of being suggests that it is alien to true manhood, and that, if brought in from without, it may be cast out again. And the temptation had a personal source. There are beings who desire to draw men away from God. The serpent, by its poison and its loathly form, is the natural symbol of such an enemy of man. The insinuating slyness of the suggestions of evil is like the sinuous gliding of the snake, and truly represents the

Digitized by Google

process by which temptation found its way into the hearts of the first pair, and of all their descendants. For it begins with casting a doubt on the reality of the prohibition. 'Hath God said?' is the first parallel opened by the besieger. The fascinations of the forbidden fruit are not dangled at first before Eve, but an apparently innocent doubt is filtered into her ear. And is not that the way in which we are still snared? The reality of moral distinctions, the essential wrongness of the sin, is obscured by a mist of sophistication. 'There is no harm in it' steals into some young man's or woman's mind about things that were forbidden at home, and they are half conquered before they know that they have been attacked. Then comes the next besieger's trench, much nearer the wall—namely, denial of the fatal consequences of the sin: 'Ye shall not surely die,' and a base hint that the prohibition was meant, not as a parapet to keep from falling headlong into the abyss, but as a barrier to keep from rising to a great good; 'for God doth know, that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods.' These are still the two lies which wile us to sin: 'It will do you no harm,' and 'You are cheating yourselves out of good by not doing it.'

2. Then comes the yielding to the tempter. As long as the prohibition was undoubted, and the fatal results certain, the fascinations of the forbidden thing were not felt. But as soon as these were tampered with, Eve saw 'that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes.' So it is still. Weaken the awe-inspiring sense of God's command, and of the ruin that follows the breach of it, and the heart of man is like a city without walls, into which any enemy can march unhindered. So long

Digitized by Google

as God's 'Thou shalt not, lest thou die,' rings in the ears, the eyes see little beauty in the sirens that sing and beckon. But once that awful voice is deadened, they charm, and allure to dally with them.

In the undeveloped condition of primitive man temptation could only assail him through the senses and appetites, and its assault would be the more irresistible because reflection and experience were not yet his. But the act of yielding was, as sin ever is, a deliberate choice to please self and disobey God. The woman's more emotional, sensitive, compliant nature made her the first victim, and her greatest glory, her craving to share her good with him whom she loves, and her power to sway his will and acts, made her his temptress. 'As the husband is, the wife is,' says Tennyson; but the converse is even truer: As the wife is, the man is.

3. The fatal consequences came with a rush. There is a gulf between being tempted and sinning, but the results of the sin are closely knit to it. They come automatically, as surely as a stream from a fountain. The promise of knowing good and evil was indeed kept, but instead of its making the sinners 'like gods,' it showed them that they were like beasts, and brought the first sense of shame. To know evil was, no doubt, a forward step intellectually; but to know it by experience, and as part of themselves, necessarily changed their ignorant innocence into bitter knowledge, and conscience awoke to rebuke them. The first thing that their opened eyes saw was themselves, and the immediate result of the sight was the first blush of shame. Before, they had walked in innocent unconsciousness, like angels or infants; now they had knowledge of good and evil, because their sin had

Digitized by Google

made evil a part of themselves, and the knowledge was bitter.

The second consequence of the fall is the disturbed relation with God, which is presented in the highly symbolical form fitting for early ages, and as true and impressive for the twentieth century as for them. Sin broke familiar communion with God, turned Him into a 'fear and a dread,' and sent the guilty pair into ambush. Is not that deeply and perpetually true? The sun seen through mists becomes a lurid ball of scowling fire. The impulse is to hide from God, or to get rid of thoughts of Him. And when He *is* felt to be near, it is as a questioner, bringing sin to mind. The shuffling excuses, which venture even to throw the blame of sin on God ('the woman whom *Thou* gavest me'), or which try to palliate it as a mistake ('the serpent beguiled me'), have to come at last, however reluctantly, to confess that 'I' did the sin. Each has to say, 'I did eat.' So shall we all have to do. We may throw the blame on circumstances, weakness of judgment, and the like, while here, but at God's bar we shall have to say, '*Mea* culpa, *mea* culpa.'

The curse pronounced on the serpent takes its habit and form as an emblem of the degradation of the personal tempter, and of the perennial antagonism between him and mankind, while even at that first hour of sin and retribution a gleam of hope, like the stray beam that steals through a gap in a thundercloud, promises that the conquered shall one day be the conqueror, and that the woman's seed, though wounded in the struggle, shall one day crush the poison-bearing, flat head in the dust, and end forever his power to harm. 'Known unto God are all his

Digitized by Google

works from the beginning,' and the Christ was promised ere the gates of Eden were shut on the exiles.

EDEN LOST AND RESTORED

'So He drove out the man: and He placed at the east of the garden of Eden cherubims and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.'—GENESIS iii. 24.

'Blessed are they that do His commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.'

REVELATION xxii. 14.

'BETTER is the end of a thing than the beginning.' Eden was fair, but the heavenly city shall be fairer. The Paradise regained is an advance on the Paradise that was lost. These are the two ends of the history of man, separated by who knows how many millenniums. Heaven lay about him in his infancy, but as he journeyed westwards its morning blush faded into the light of common day—and only at eventide shall the sky glow again with glory and colour, and the western heaven at last outshine the eastern, with a light that shall never die. A fall, and a rise—a rise that reverses the fall, a rise that transcends the glory from which he fell,—that is the Bible's notion of the history of the world, and I, for my part, believe it to be true, and feel it to be the one satisfactory explanation of what I see round about me and am conscious of within me.

1. *Man had an Eden and lost it.*

I take the Fall to be a historical fact. To all who accept the authority of Scripture, no words are needed beyond the simple statement before us, but we may just gather up the signs that there are on the wide field of the world's history, and in the narrower experience of ndividuals, that such a fall has been.

Digitized by Google

Look at the condition of the world: its degradation, its savagery—all its pining myriads, all its untold millions who sit in darkness and the shadow of death. Will any man try to bring before him the actual state of the heathen world, and, retaining his belief in a God, profess that these men are what God meant men to be? It seems to me that the present condition of the world is not congruous with the idea that men are in their primitive state, and if this is what God meant men for, then I see not how the dark clouds which rest on His wisdom and His love are to be lifted off.

Then, again—if the world has not a Fall in its history, then we must take the lowest condition as the one from which all have come; and is that idea capable of defence? Do we see anywhere signs of an upward process going on now? Have we any experience of a tribe raising itself? Can you catch anywhere a race in the act of struggling up, outside of the pale of Christianity? Is not the history of all a history of decadence, except only where the Gospel has come in to reverse the process?

But passing from this: What mean the experiences of the individual—these longings; this hard toil; these sorrows?

How comes it that man alone on earth, manifestly meant to be leader, lord, etc., seems but cursed with a higher nature that he may know greater sorrows, and raised above the beasts in capacity that he may sink below them in woe, this capacity only leading to a more exquisite susceptibility, to a more various as well as more poignant misery?

Whence come the contrarieties and discordance in his nature?

Digitized by Google

It seems to me that all this is best explained as the Bible explains it by saying: (1) Sin has done it; (2) Sin is not part of God's original design, but man has fallen; (3) Sin had a personal beginning. There have been men who were pure, able to stand but free to fall.

It seems to me that that explanation is more in harmony with the facts of the case, finds more response in the unsophisticated instinct of man, than any other. It seems to me that, though it leaves many dark and sorrowful mysteries all unsolved, yet that it alleviates the blackest of them, and flings some rays of hope on them all. It seems to me that it relieves the character and administration of God from the darkest dishonour; that it delivers man's position and destiny from the most hopeless despair; that though it leaves the mystery of the origin of evil, it brings out into clearest relief the central truths that evil is evil, and sin and sorrow are not God's will; that it vindicates as something better than fond imaginings the vague aspirations of the soul for a fair and holy state; that it establishes, as nothing else will, at once the love of God and the dignity of man; that it leaves open the possibility of the final overthrow of that Sin which it treats as an intrusion and stigmatises as a fall; that it therefore braces for more vigorous, hopeful conflict against it, and that while but for it the answer to the despairing question, Hast Thou made all men in vain? must be either the wailing echo 'In vain,' or the denial that He has made them at all, there is hope and there is power. and there is brightness thrown on the character of God and on the fate of man, by the old belief that God made man upright, and that man made himself a sinner.

Digitized by Google

2. *Heaven restores the lost Eden.*

'God is not ashamed to be called their God, *for* He hath prepared them a *city*.'

The highest conception we can form of heaven is the reversal of all the evil of earth, and the completion of its incomplete good: the sinless purity—the blessed presence of God—the fulfilment of all desires—the service which is *blessed*, not toil—the changelessness which is progress, not stagnation.

3. *Heaven surpasses the lost Eden.*

(1) Garden—City.

The perfection of association—the *nations* of the saved. Here 'we mortal millions live alone,' even when united with dearest. Like Egyptian monks of old, each dwelling in his own cave, though all were a community.

(2) The richer experience.

The memory of past sorrows which are understood at last.

Heaven's bliss in contrast with earthly joys.

Sinlessness of those who have been sinners will be more intensely lustrous for its dark background in the past. Redeemed men will be brighter than angels.

The impossibility of a fall.

Death behind us.

The former things shall no more come to mind, being lost in blaze of present transcendent experience, but yet shall be remembered as having led to that perfect state.

Christ not only repairs the 'tabernacle which was fallen,' but builds a fairer temple. He brings 'a statelier Eden,' and makes us dwell for ever in a Garden City.

Digitized by Google

THE GROWTH AND POWER OF SIN

'And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock, and of the fat thereof. And the Lord had respect unto Abel, and to his offering: But unto Cain, and to his offering, he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell. And the Lord said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him. And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him. And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not. Am I my brother's keeper? And He said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto Me from the ground. And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand. When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength. A fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth. And Cain said unto the Lord, My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, Thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from Thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth: and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me. And the Lord said unto him, Therefore, whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him. And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden.'

GENESIS iv. 3-16.

MANY lessons crowd on us from this section. Its general purport is to show the growth of sin, and its power to part man from man even as it has parted man from God. We may call the whole 'The beginning of the fatal operations of sin on human society.'

1. The first recorded act of worship occasions the first murder. Is not that only too correct a forecast of the oceans of blood which have been shed in the name of religion, and a striking proof of the subtle power of sin to corrupt even the best, and out of it to make the worst? What a lesson against the bitter hatred which has too often sprung up on so-called religious grounds! No malice is so venomous, no hate so fierce, no cruelty so fiendish, as those which are fed and fanned by religion. Here is the first triumph of sin, that it poisons the very springs of worship, and

Digitized by Google

makes what should be the great uniter of men in sweet and holy bonds their great separator.

2. Sin here appears as having power to bar men's way to God. Much ingenuity has been spent on the question why Abel's offering was accepted and Cain's rejected. But the narrative itself shows in the words of Jehovah, 'If thou doest well, is there not acceptance?' that the reason lay in Cain's evil deeds. So, in 1 John iii. 12, the fratricide is put down to the fact that 'his works were evil, and his brother's righteous'; and Hebrews xi. 4 differs from this view only in making the ground of righteousness prominent, when it ascribes the acceptableness of Abel's offering to faith. Both these passages are founded on the narrative, and we need not seek farther for the reason of the different reception of the two offerings. Character, then, or, more truly, faith, which is the foundation of a righteous character, determines the acceptableness of worship. Cain's offering had no sense of dependence, no outgoing of love and trust, no adoration,—though it may have had fear,—and no moral element. So it had no sweet odour for God. Abel's was sprinkled with some drops of the incense of lowly trust, and came from a heart which fain would be pure; therefore it was a joy to God. So we are taught at the very beginning, that, as is the man, so is his sacrifice; that the prayer of the wicked is an abomination. Plenty of worship nowadays is Cain worship. Many reputable professing Christians bring just such sacrifices. The prayers of such never reach higher than the church ceiling. Of course, the lesson of the story is not that a man must be pure before his sacrifice is accepted. Of course, the faintest cry of trust is heard, and a contrite heart, however sinful, is always welcome. But we are

Digitized by Google

taught that our acts of worship must have our hearts in them, and that it is vain to pray and to love evil. Sin has the awful power of blocking our way to God.

3. Note in one word that we have here at the beginning of human history the solemn distinction which runs through it all. These two, so near in blood, so separate in spirit, head the two classes into which Scripture decisively parts men, especially men who have heard the gospel. It is unfashionable now to draw that broad line between the righteous and the wicked, believers and unbelievers. Sheep and goats are all one. Modern liberal sentiment—so-called—will not consent to such narrowness as the old-fashioned classification. There are none of us black, and none white; we are all different shades of grey. But facts do not quite bear out such amiable views. Perhaps it is not less charitable, and a great deal truer, to draw the line broad and plain, on one side of which is peace and safety, and on the other trouble and death, if only we make it plain that no man need stop one minute on the dark side.

4. The solemn divine voice reads the lesson of the power of sin, when once done, over the sinner. Like a wild beast, it crouches in ambush at his door, ready to spring and devour. The evil deed once committed takes shape, as it were, and waits to seize the doer. Remorse, inward disturbance, and above all, the fatal inclination to repeat sin till it becomes a habit, are set forth with terrible force in these grim figures. What a menagerie of ravenous beasts some of us have at the doors of our hearts! With what murderous longing they glare at us, seeking to fascinate us, and make us their prey! When we sin, we cannot escape the issues;

Digitized by Google

and every wrong thing we do has a kind of horrible life given it, and sits henceforth there, beside us, ready to rend us. The tempting, seducing power of our own evils was never put in more startling and solemnly true words, on which the bitter experience of many a poor victim of his own past is a commentary. The eternal duty of resistance is farther taught by the words. Hope of victory, encouragement to struggle, the assurance that even these savage beasts may be subdued, and the lion and adder (the hidden and the glaring evils—those which wound unseen, and which spring with a roar) may be overcome, led in a silken leash or charmed into harmlessness, are given in the command, which is also a promise, 'Rule thou over it.'

5. The deadly fruit of hate is taught us in the brief account of the actual murder. Notice the impressive plainness and fewness of the words. 'Cain rose up against his brother, and slew him.' A kind of horror-struck awe of the crime is audible. Observe the emphasis with which 'his brother' is repeated in the verse and throughout. Observe, also, the vivid light thrown by the story on the rise and progress of the sin. It begins with envy and jealousy. Cain was not wroth because his offering was rejected. What did he care for that? But what angered him was that his brother had what he had not. So selfishness was at the bottom, and that led on to envy, and that to hatred. Then comes a pause, in which God speaks remonstrances,—as God's voice—conscience—does now to us all,—between the imagination and the act of evil. A real or a feigned reconciliation is effected. The brothers go in apparent harmony to the field. No new provocation appears, but the old feelings, kept down for a time, come in again with a rush, and Cain is

Digitized by Google

swept away by them. Hatred left to work means murder. The heart is the source of all evil. Selfishness is the mother tincture out of which all sorts of sin can be made. Guard the thoughts, and keep down self, and the deeds will take care of themselves.

6. Mark how close on the heels of sin God's question treads! How God spoke, we know not. Doubtless in some fashion suited to the needs of Cain. But He speaks to us as really as to him, and no sooner is the rush of passion over, and the bad deed done, than a revulsion comes. What we call conscience asks the question in stern tones, which make a man's flesh creep. Our sin is like touching the electric bells which people sometimes put on their windows to give notice of thieves. As soon as we step beyond the line of duty we set the alarm going, and it wakens the sleeping conscience. Some of us go so far as to have silenced the voice within; but, for the most part, it speaks immediately after we have gratified our inclinations wrongly.

7. Cain's defiant answer teaches us how a man hardens himself against God's voice. It also shows us how intensely selfish all sin is, and how weakly foolish its excuses are. It is sin which has rent men apart from men, and made them deny the very idea that they have duties to all men. The first sin was only against God; the second was against God and man. The first sin did not break, though it saddened, human love; the second kindled the flames of infernal hatred, and caused the first drops to flow of the torrents of blood which have soaked the earth. When men break away from God, they will soon murder one another.

Cain was his brother's keeper. His question answered itself. If Abel was his brother, then he was bound to

Digitized by Google

look after him. His self-condemning excuse is but a specimen of the shallow pleas by which the forgetfulness of duties we owe to all mankind, and all sins, are defended.

8. The stern sentence is next pronounced. First we have the grand figure of the innocent blood having a voice which pierces the heavens. That teaches in the most forcible way the truth that God knows the crimes done by 'man's inhumanity to man,' even when the meek sufferers are silent. According to the fine old legend of the cranes of Ibycus, a bird of the air will carry the matter. It speaks, too, of God's tender regard for His saints, whose blood is precious in His sight; and it teaches that He will surely requite. We cannot but think of the innocent blood shed on Calvary, of the Brother of us all, whose sacrifice was accepted of God. His blood, too, crieth from the ground, has a voice which speaks in the ear of God, but not to plead for vengeance, but pardon.

'Jesus' blood through earth and skies,
Mercy, free, boundless mercy, cries.'

Then follows the sentence which falls into two parts —the curse of bitter, unrequited toil, and the doom of homeless wandering. The blood which has been poured out on the battlefield fertilises the soil; but Abel's blasted the earth. It was a supernatural infliction, to teach that bloodshed polluted the earth, and so to shed a nameless horror over the deed. We see an analogous feeling in the common belief that places where some foul sin has been committed are cursed. We see a weak natural correspondence in the devastating effect of war, as expressed in the old saying that no grass would grow where the hoof of the Turk's horse had stamped.

Digitized by Google

The doom of wandering, which would be compulsory by reason of the earth's barrenness, is a parable. The murderer is hunted from place to place, as the Greek fable has it, by the furies, who suffer him not to rest. Conscience drives a man 'through dry places, seeking rest, and finding none.' All sin makes us homeless wanderers. There is but one home for the heart, one place of repose for a man, namely, in the heart of God, the secret place of the Most High; and he who, for his sin, durst not enter there, is driven forth into 'a salt land and not inhabited,' and has to wander wearily there. The legend of the wandering Jew, and that other of the sailor, condemned for ever to fly before the gale through stormy seas, have in them a deep truth. The earthly punishment of departing from God is that we have not where to lay our heads. Every sinner is a fugitive and a vagabond. But if we love God we are still wanderers indeed, but we are 'pilgrims and sojourners with Thee.'

9. Cain's remonstrance completes the tragic picture. We see in it despair without penitence. He has no word of confession. If he had accepted his chastisement, and learned by it his sin, all the bitterness would have passed away. But he only writhes in agony, and adds, to the sentence pronounced, terrors of his own devising. God had not forbidden him to come into His presence. But he feels that he dare not venture thither. And he was right; for, whether we suppose that some sensible manifestation of the divine presence is meant by 'Thy face' or no, a man who had unrepented sin on his conscience, and murmurings in his heart, could not hold intercourse with God; nor would he wish to do so. Thus we learn again the lesson that sin separates from our Father, and that chastisements,

Digitized by Google

not accepted as signs of His love, build up a black wall between God and us.

Nor had Cain been told that his life was in danger. But his conscience made a coward of him, as of us all, and told him what he deserved. There were, no doubt, many other children of Adam, who would be ready to avenge Abel's death. The wild justice of revenge is deep in the heart of men; and the natural impulse would be to hunt down the murderer like a wolf. It is a dreadful picture of the defiant and despairing sinner, tortured by well-founded fears, shut out from the presence of God, but not able to shut out thoughts of Him, and seeing an avenger in every man.

We need not ask how God set a mark on Cain. Enough that His doing so was a merciful alleviation of his lot, and teaches us how God's long-suffering spares life, and tempers judgment, that there may still be space for repentance. If even Cain has gracious protection and mercy blended with his chastisement, who can be beyond the pale of God's compassion, and with whom will not His loving providence and patient pity labour? No man is so scorched by the fire of retribution, but many a dewy drop from God's tenderness falls on him. No doubt, the story of the preservation of Cain was meant to restrain the blood-feuds so common and ruinous in early times; and we need the lesson yet, to keep us from vengeance under the mask of justice. But the deepest lesson and truest pathos of it lies in the picture of the watchful kindness of God lingering round the wretched man, like gracious sunshine playing on some scarred and black rock, to win him back by goodness to penitence, and through penitence to peace.

Digitized by Google

WHAT CROUCHES AT THE DOOR

'If thou doest not well, sin croucheth at the door: and unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.'—GENESIS iv. 7 (R. V.).

THESE early narratives clothe great moral and spiritual truths in picturesque forms, through which it is difficult for us to pierce. In the world's childhood God spoke to men as to children, because there were no words then framed which would express what we call abstract conceptions. They had to be shown by pictures. But these early men, simple and childlike as they were, had consciences; and one abstraction they did understand, and that was sin. They knew the difference between good and evil.

So we have here God speaking to Cain, who was wroth because of the rejection of his sacrifice; and in dim, enigmatical words setting forth the reason of that rejection. 'If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted?' Then clearly his sacrifice was rejected because it was the sacrifice of an evil-doer. His description as such is given in the words of my text, which are hard for us to translate into our modern, less vivid and picturesque language. 'If thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door; and unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.' Strange as the words sound, if I mistake not, they convey some very solemn lessons, and if well considered, become pregnant with meaning.

The key to the whole interpretation of them is to remember that they describe what happens after, and because of, wrong-doing. They are all suspended on 'If thou doest not well.' Then, in that case, for the first thing—'sin lieth at the door.' Now the words,

Digitized by Google

translated here 'lieth' is employed only to express the *crouching* of an animal, and frequently of a wild animal. The picture, then, is of the wrong-doer's sin lying at his door there like a crouching tiger ready to spring, and if it springs, fatal. 'If thou doest not well, a wild beast crouches at thy door.'

Then there follow, with a singular swift transition of the metaphor, other words still harder to interpret, and which have been, as a matter of fact, interpreted in very diverse fashions. 'And unto thee shall be *its*' (I make that slight alteration upon our version) 'desire, and thou shalt rule over it.' Where did we hear these words before? They were spoken to Eve, in the declaration of her punishment. They contain the blessing that was embedded in the curse. 'Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.' The longing of the pure womanly heart to the husband of her love, and the authority of the husband over the loving wife—the source of the deepest joy and purity of earth, is transferred, by a singularly bold metaphor, to this other relationship, and, in horrible parody of the wedded union and love, we have the picture of the sin, that was thought of as crouching at the sinner's door like a wild beast, now, as it were, wedded to him. He is mated to it now, and it has a kind of tigerish, murderous desire after him, while he on his part is to subdue and control it.

The reference of these clauses to the sin which has just been spoken of involves, no doubt, a very bold figure, which has seemed to many readers too bold to be admissible, and the words have therefore been supposed to refer to Abel, who, as the younger brother, would be subordinate to Cain. But such a reference breaks the connection of the sentence, introduces a

Digitized by Google

thought which is not a consequence of Cain's not doing well, has no moral bearing to warrant its appearance here, and compels us to travel an inconveniently long distance back in the context to find an antecedent to the 'his' and 'him' of our text. It seems to be more in consonance, therefore, with the archaic style of the whole narrative, and to yield a profounder and worthier meaning, if we recognise the boldness of the metaphor, and take 'sin' as the subject of the whole. Now all this puts in concrete, metaphorical shape, suited to the stature of the hearers, great and solemn truths. Let us try to translate them into more modern speech.

1. First think, then, of that wild beast which we tether to our doors by our wrong-doing.

We talk about 'responsibility' and 'guilt,' and 'consequences that never can be effaced,' and the like. And all these abstract and quasi-philosophical terms are implied in the grim, tremendous metaphor of my text. 'If thou doest not well, a tiger, a wild beast, is crouching at thy door.' We are all apt to be deceived by the imagination that when an evil deed is done, it passes away and leaves no permanent results. The lesson taught the childlike primitive man here, at the beginning, before experience had accumulated instances which might demonstrate the solemn truth, was that every human deed is immortal, and that the transitory evil thought, or word, or act, which seems to fleet by like a cloud, has a permanent being, and hereafter haunts the life of the doer, as a real presence. If thou doest not well, thou dost create a horrible something which nestles beside thee henceforward. The momentary act is incarnated, as it were, and sits there at the doer's doorpost waiting for him; which being turned

Digitized by Google

into less forcible but more modern language, is just this: every sin that a man does has perennial consequences, which abide with the doer for evermore.

I need not dwell upon illustrations of that to any length. Let me just run over two or three ways in which it is true. First of all, there is that solemn fact which we put into a long word that comes glibly off people's lips, and impresses them very little—the solemn fact of responsibility. We speak in common talk of such and such a thing lying at some one's door. Whether the phrase has come from this text I do not know. But it helps to illustrate the force of these words, and to suggest that they mean this, among other things, that we have to answer for every deed, however evanescent, however long forgotten. Its guilt is on our heads. Its consequences have to be experienced by us. We drink as we have brewed. As we make our beds, so we lie on them. There is no escape from the law of consequences. 'If 'twere done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly.' But seeing that it is not done when 'tis done, then perhaps it would be better that it were not done at all. Your deed of a moment, forgotten almost as soon as done, lies there at your door; or to take a more modern and commercial figure, it is debited to your account, and stands inscribed against you for ever.

Think how you would like it, if all your deeds from your childhood, all your follies, your vices, your evil thoughts, your evil impulses, and your evil actions, were all made visible and embodied there before you. They are there, though you do not see them yet. All round your door they sit, ready to meet you and to bay out condemnation as you go forth. They are there, and one day you will find out that they are. For this

Digitized by Google

is the law, certain as the revolution of the stars and fixed as the pillars of the firmament: 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' There is no seed which does not sprout, in the harvest of the moral life. Every deed germinates according to its kind. For all that a man does he has to carry the consequences, and every one shall bear his own burden. 'If thou doest not well,' it is not, as we fondly conceive it sometimes to be, a mere passing deflection from the rule of right, which is done and done with, but we have created, as out of our very own substance, a witness against ourselves whose voice can never be stifled. 'If thou doest not well,' thy sin takes permanent form and is fastened to thy door.

And then let me remind you, too, how the metaphor of our text is confirmed by other obvious facts, on which I need but briefly dwell. Putting aside all the remoter bearings of that thought of responsibility, I suppose we all admit that we have consciences; I suppose that we all know that we have memories; I suppose we all of us have seen, in the cases of others, and have experienced for ourselves, how deeds long done and long forgotten have an awful power of rising again after many long years.

Be sure that your memory has in it everything that you ever did. A landscape may be hidden by mists, but a puff of wind will clear them away, and it will all lie there, visible to the furthest horizon. There is no fact more certain than the extraordinary swiftness and completeness with which, in certain circumstances of life, and often very near the close of it, the whole panorama of the past may rise again before a man, as if one lightning flash showed all the dreary desolation that lay behind him. There have been

Digitized by Google

men recovered from drowning and the like, who have told us that, as in an instant, there seemed unrolled before their startled eyes the whole scroll of their earthly career.

The records of memory are like those pages on which you write with sympathetic ink, which disappears when dry, and seems to leave the page blank. You have only to hold it before the fire, or subject it to the proper chemical process, and at once it stands out legible. You are writing your biography upon the fleshly tables of your heart, my brother; and one day it will all be spread out before you, and you will be bid to read it, and to say what you think of it. The stings of a nettle will burn for days, if they are touched with water. The sting and inflammation of your evil deeds, though it has died down, is capable of being resuscitated, and it will be.

What an awful menagerie of unclean beasts some of us have at our doors! What sort of creatures have you tethered at yours? Crawling serpents, ugly and venomous; wild creatures, fierce and bloody, obscene and foul; tigers and bears; lustful and mischievous apes and monkeys? or such as are lovely and of good report,—doves and lambs, creatures pure and peaceable, patient to serve and gentle of spirit? Remember, remember, that what a man soweth—be it hemlock or be it wheat—that, and nothing else, 'shall he reap.'

2. Now, let us look for a moment at the next thought that is here; which is put into a strong, and, to our modern notions, somewhat violent metaphor;—the horrible longing, as it were, of sin toward the sinner: 'Unto thee shall be its desire.'

As I explained, these words are drawn from the previous chapter, where they refer to the holy union

Digitized by Google

of heart and affection in husband and wife. Here they are transferred with tremendous force, to set forth that which is a kind of horrible parody of that conjugal relation. A man is married to his wickedness, is mated to his evil, and it has, as it were, a tigerish longing for him, unhallowed and murderous. That is to say—our sins act towards us as if they desired to draw our love to themselves. This is just another form of the statement, that when once a man has done a wrong thing, it has an awful power of attracting him and making him hunger to do it again. Every evil that I do may, indeed, for a moment create in me a revulsion of conscience; but it also exercises a fascination over me which it is hard to resist. It is a great deal easier to find a man who has never done a wrong thing than to find a man who has only done it once. If the wall of the dyke is sound it will keep the water out, but if there is the tiniest hole in it, the flood will come in. So the evil that you do asserts its power over you, or, in the vigorous metaphor of my text, it has a fierce, longing desire after you, and it gets you into its clutches.

'The foolish woman sitteth in the high places of the city, and saith, Whoso is simple let him turn in hither.' And foolish men go after her, and—'know not that her guests are in the depth of hell.' Ah! my brother! beware of that siren voice that draws you away from all the sweet and simple and pure food which Wisdom spreads upon her table, to tempt the beast that is in you with the words, 'Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.' Beware of the first step, for as sure as you are living, the first step taken will make the second seem to become necessary. The first drop will be followed

Digitized by Google

by a bigger second, and the second, at a shorter interval, by a more copious third, until the drops become a shower, and the shower becomes a deluge. The river of evil is ever wider and deeper, and more tumultuous. The little sins get in at the window, and open the front door for the full-grown housebreakers. One smooths the path for the other. All sin has an awful power of perpetuating and increasing itself. As the prophet says in his vision of the doleful creatures that make their sport in the desolate city, 'None of them shall want her mate. The wild beasts of the desert shall meet with the wild beasts of the island.' Every sin tells upon character, and makes the repetition of itself more and more easy. 'None is barren among them.' And all sin is linked together in a slimy tangle, like a field of seaweed, so that the man once caught in its oozy fingers is almost sure to be drowned.

3. And now, lastly, one word about the command, which is also a promise: 'To thee shall be its desire, and thou shalt rule over it.'

Man's primitive charter, according to the earlier chapters of Genesis, was to have dominion over the beasts of the field. Cain knew what it was to war against the wild creatures which contested the possession of the earth with man, and to tame some of them for his uses. And, says the divine voice, just as you war against the beasts of prey, just as you subdue to your purposes and yoke to your implements the tamable animals over which you have dominion, so rule over *this* wild beast that is threatening you. It is needful for all men, if they do not mean to be torn to pieces, to master the animal that is in them, and the wild thing that has been created

Digitized by Google

out of them. It is bone of your bone and flesh of your flesh. It is your own evil that is thus incarnated there, as it were, before you; and you have to subdue it, if it is not to tyrannise over you. We all admit that in theory, but how terribly hard the practice! The words of our text seem to carry but little hope or comfort in them, to the man who has tried—as, no doubt, many of us have tried—to flee the lusts that war against the soul, and to bridle the animal that is in him. Those who have done so most honestly know best how hard it is, and may fairly ask, Is this useless repetition of the threadbare injunction all that you have to say to us? If so, you may as well hold your tongue. A wild beast sits at my door, you say, and then you bid me, 'Rule thou over it!' Tell me to tame the tiger! 'Canst thou draw out Leviathan with a hook? Wilt thou take him a servant for ever?'

I do not undervalue the earnest and sometimes partially successful efforts at moral reformation which some men of more than usual force of character are able to make, emancipating themselves from the outward practice of gross sin, and achieving for themselves much that is admirable. But if we rightly understand what sin is—namely, the taking self for our law and centre instead of God—and how deep its working and all-pervading its poison, we shall learn the tragic significance of the prophet's question, 'Can the leopard change his spots?' Then may a man cast out sin from his nature by his own resolve, when the body can eliminate poison from the veins by its own energy. If there is nothing more to be said to the world than this message, 'Sin lieth at thy door—rule thou over it,' we have no

Digitized by Google

gospel to preach, and sin's dominion is secure. For there is nothing in all this world of empty, windy words, more empty and windy than to come to a poor soul that is all bespattered and stained with sin, and say to him: 'Get up, and make thyself clean, and keep thyself so!' It cannot be done.

So my text, though it keeps itself within the limits of the law and only proclaims duty, must have hidden, in its very hardness, a sweet kernel of promise. For what God commands God enables us to do.

Therefore these words, 'Rule thou over it,' do really point onwards through all the ages to that one fact in which every man's sin is conquered and neutralised, and every man's struggles may be made hopeful and successful, the great fact that Jesus Christ, God's own Son, came down from heaven, like an athlete descending into the arena, to fight with and to overcome the grim wild beasts, our passions and our sins, and to lead them, transformed, in the silken leash of His love.

My brother! your sin is mightier than you. The old word of the Psalm is true about every one of us, 'Our iniquities are stronger than we.' And, blessed be His name! the hope of the Psalmist is the experience of the Christian: 'As for my transgressions, Thou wilt purge them away.' Christ will strengthen you to conquer; Christ will take away your guilt; Christ will bear, has borne your burden; Christ will cleanse your memory; Christ will purge your conscience. Trusting to Him, and by His power and life within us, we may conquer our evil. Trusting to Him, and for the sake of His blood shed for us all upon the cross, we are delivered from the burden, guilt, and power of our sins and of our sin. With

Digitized by Google

thy hand in His, and thy will submitted to Him, 'thou shalt tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the dragon thou shalt trample under foot.'

WITH, BEFORE, AFTER

'Enoch walked with God.'—GENESIS v. 22.
'Walk before Me.'—GENESIS xvii. 1.
'Ye shall walk after the Lord your God.'—DEUTERONOMY xiii. 4.

YOU will have anticipated, I suppose, my purpose in doing what I very seldom do—cutting little snippets out of different verses and putting them together. You see that these three fragments, in their resemblances and in their differences, are equally significant and instructive. They concur in regarding life as a walk—a metaphor which expresses continuity, so that every man's life is a whole, which expresses progress, which expresses change, and which implies a goal. They agree in saying that God must be brought into a life somehow, and in some aspect, if that life is to be anything else but an aimless wandering, if it is to tend to the point to which every human life should attain. But then they diverge, and, if we put them together, they say to us that there are three different ways in which we ought to bring God into our life. We should 'walk *with* Him,' like Enoch; we should 'walk *before*' Him, as Abraham was bade to do; and we should 'walk *after*' Him, as the command to do was given to all Israel. And these three prepositions, *with*, *before*, *after*, attached to the general idea of life as a walk, give us a triple aspect—which yet is, of course, fundamentally, one—of the way in which life may be ennobled, dignified, calmed, hallowed, focussed, and concentrated by the various relations

Digitized by Google

into which we enter with Him. So I take the three of them.

1. 'Enoch walked *with* God.'

That is a sweet, simple, easily intelligible, and yet lofty way of putting the notion which we bring into a more abstract and less impressive shape when we talk about communion with God. Two men travelling along a road keep each other company. 'How can two walk together except they be agreed?' The companion is at our side all the same, though the mists may have come down and we cannot see Him. We can hear His voice, we can grasp His hand, we can catch the echoes of His steps. We know He is there, and that is enough. Enoch and God walked together, by the simple exercise of the faith that fills the Invisible with one great, loving Face. By a continuous, definite effort, as we are going through the bustle of daily life, and amid all the pettiness and perplexities and monotonies that make up our often weary and always heavy days, we can realise to ourselves that He is of a truth at our sides, and by purity of life and heart we can bring Him nearer, and can make ourselves more conscious of His nearness. For, brethren, the one thing that parts a man from God, and makes it impossible for a heart to expatiate in the thought of His presence, is the contrariety to His will in our conduct. The slightest invisible film of mist that comes across the blue abyss of the mighty sky will blot out the brightest of the stars, and we may sometimes not be able to see the mist, and only know that it is there because we do not see the planet. So unconscious sin may steal in between us and God, and we shall no longer be able to say, 'I walk with Him.'

Digitized by Google

The Roman Catholics talk, in their mechanical way, of bringing down all the spiritual into the material and formal, about the 'practice of the presence of God.' It is an ugly phrase, but it means a great thing, that Christian people ought, very much more than they do, to aim, day by day, and amidst their daily duties, at realising that most elementary thought which, like a great many other elementary thoughts, is impotent because we believe it so utterly, that wherever we are, we may have Him with us. It is the secret of blessedness, of tranquillity, of power, of everything good and noble.

'I am a stranger with Thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were,' said the Psalmist of old. If he had left out these two little words, 'with Thee,' he would have been uttering a tragic complaint; but when they come in, all that is painful, all that is solitary, all that is transient, bitterly transient, in the long succession of the generations that have passed across earth's scene, and have not been kindred to it, is cleared away and changed into gladness. Never mind, though you are a stranger, if you have that companion. Never mind, though you are only a sojourner; if you have Him with you, whatever passes He will not pass; and though we dwell here in a system to which we do not belong, and its transiency and our transiency bring with them many sorrows, when we can say, 'Lord! Thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations,' we are at home, and that eternal home will never pass.

Enoch 'walked with God,' and, of course, 'God took him.' There was nothing else for it, and there could be no other end, for a life of communion with God here has in it the prophecy and the pledge of a life

Digitized by Google

of eternal union hereafter. So, then, 'practise the presence of God.' An old mystic says: 'If I can tell how many times to-day I have thought about God, I have not thought about Him often enough.' Walk with Him by faith, by effort, by purity.

2. And now take the other aspect suggested by the other word God spoke to Abraham: 'I am the Almighty God, walk *before* Me and be thou perfect.'

That suggests, as I suppose I do not need to point out, the idea not only of communion, which the former phrase brought to our minds, but that of the inspection of our conduct. 'As ever in the great Taskmaster's eye,' says the stern Puritan poet, and although one may object to that word 'Taskmaster,' yet the idea conveyed is the correct expansion of the commandment given to Abraham. Observe how 'walk before Me' is dovetailed, as it were, between the revelation 'I am the Almighty God' and the injunction 'Be thou perfect.' The realisation of that presence of the Almighty which is implied in the expression 'Walk before Me,' the assurance that we are in His sight, will lead straight to the fulfilment of the injunction that bears upon the moral conduct. The same connection of thought underlies Peter's injunction, 'Like as He . . . is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation,' followed immediately as it is by, 'If ye call on Him as Father, who without respect of persons judgeth'—as a present estimate—'according to every man's work, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear'—that reverential awe which will lead you to be 'holy even as I am holy.'

This thought that we are in that divine presence, and that there is silently, but most really, a divine opinion being formed of us, consolidated, as it were,

Digitized by Google

moment by moment through our lives, is only tolerable if we have been walking with God. If we are sure, by the power of our communion with Him, of His loving heart as well as of His righteous judgment, then we can spread ourselves out before Him, as a woman will lay out her webs of cloth on the green grass for the sun to blaze down upon them, and bleach the ingrained filth out of them. We must first walk 'with God' before the consciousness that we are walking 'before' Him becomes one that we can entertain and not go mad. When we are sure of the 'with' we can bear the 'before.'

Did you ever see how on a review day, as each successive battalion and company nears the saluting-point where the General inspecting sits, they straighten themselves up and dress their ranks, and pull themselves together as they pass beneath his critical eye. A master's eye makes diligent servants. If we, in the strength of God, would only realise, day by day and act by act of our lives, that we are before Him, what a revolution could be effected on our characters and what a transformation on all our conduct!

'Walk before Me' and you will be perfect. For the Hebrew words on which I am now commenting may be read, in accordance with the usage of the language, as being not only a commandment but a promise, or, rather, not as two commandments, but a commandment with an appended promise, and so as equivalent to 'If you will walk before Me you will be perfect.' And if we realise that we are under 'the pure eyes and perfect judgment of' God, we shall thereby be strongly urged and mightily helped to be perfect as He is perfect.

3. Lastly, take the other relation, which is suggested

Digitized by Google

by the third of my texts, where Israel as a whole is commanded to 'walk *after* the Lord' their God.

In harmony with the very frequent expression of the Old Testament about 'going after idols,' so Israel here is to 'go after God.' What does that mean? Communion, the consciousness of being judged by God, will lead on to aspiration and loving, longing effort to get nearer and nearer to Him. 'My soul followeth hard after Thee,' said the Psalmist, 'Thy right hand upholdeth me.' That element of yearning aspiration, of eager desire to be closer and closer, and liker and liker, to God must be in all true religion. And unless we have it in some measure, it is useless to talk about being Christian people. To press onwards, not as though we had already attained, but following after, if that we may apprehend that for which also we are apprehended, is the attitude of every true follower of Christ. The very crown of the excellence of the Christian life is that it never can reach its goal, and therefore an immortal youth of aspiration and growth is guaranteed to it. Christian people, are you following after God? Are you any nearer to Him than you were ten years ago? 'Walk with Me, walk before Me, walk after Me.'

I need not do more than remind you of another meaning involved in this same expression. If I walk after God, then I let Him go before me and show me my road. Do you remember how, when the ark was to cross Jordan, the commandment was given to the Israelites to let it go well on in front, so that there should be no mistake about the course, 'for ye have not passed this way heretofore.' Do not be in too great a hurry to press upon the heels of God, if I may so say. Do not let your decisions

Digitized by Google

outrun His providence. Keep back the impatience that would hurry on, and wait for His ripening purposes to ripen and His counsels to develop themselves. Walk after God, and be sure you do not go in front of your Guide, or you will lose both your way and your Guide.

I need not say more than a word about the highest aspect which this third of our commandments takes, 'His sheep follow Him'—'leaving us an example that we should follow in His steps,' that is the culmination of the walking 'with,' and 'before,' and 'after' God which these Old Testament saints were partially practising. All is gathered into the one great word, 'He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself also so to walk even as He walked.'

THE COURSE AND CROWN OF A DEVOUT LIFE

'And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him.'
GENESIS v. 24.

THIS notice of Enoch occurs in the course of a catalogue of the descendants of Adam, from the Creation to the Deluge. It is evidently a very ancient document, and is constructed on a remarkable plan. The formula for each man is the same. So-and-so lived, begat his heir, the next in the series, lived on after that so many years, having anonymous children, lived altogether so long, and then died. The chief thing about each life is the birth of the successor, and each man's career is in broad outline the same. A dreary monotony runs through the ages. How brief and uniform may be the records of lives of striving and tears and smiles and love that stretched through centuries! Nine hundred years shrink into less than as many lines.

Digitized by Google

The solemn monotony is broken in the case of Enoch. This paragraph begins as usual—he 'lived'; but afterwards, instead of that word, we read that he 'walked with God'—happy they for whom such a phrase is equivalent to 'live'—and, instead of 'died,' it is said of him that 'he *was not*.' That seems to imply that he, as it were, slipped out of sight or suddenly disappeared; as one of the psalms says, 'I looked, and lo! he was not.' He was there a moment ago—now he is gone; and my text tells how that sudden withdrawal came about. God, with whom he walked, put out His hand and took him to Himself. Of course. What other end could there be to a life that was all passed in communion with God except that apotheosis and crown of it all, the lifting of the man into closer communion with his Father and his Friend?

So, then, there are just these two things here—the noblest life and its crown.

1. The noblest life.

'He walked with God.' That is all. There is no need to tell what he did or tried to do, how he sorrowed or joyed, what were his circumstances. These may all fade from men's knowledge as they have somewhat faded from his memory up yonder. It is enough that he walked with God.

Of course, we have here, underlying the phrase, the familiar comparison of life to a journey, with all its suggestions of constant change and constant effort, and with the suggestion, too, that each life should be a progress directly tending to one clearly recognised goal. But passing from that, let us just think for a moment of the characteristics which must go to make up a life of which we can say that it is walking with God. The first of these clearly is the one that the writer of the

Digitized by Google

Epistle to the Hebrews puts his finger upon, when he makes faith the spring of Enoch's career. The first requisite to true communion with God is vigorous exercise of that faculty by which we realise the fact of His presence with us; and that not as a jealous-eyed inspector, from whose scrutiny we would fain escape, but as a companion and friend to whom we can cleave. 'He that cometh to God,' and walks with God, must first of all 'believe that He *is*'; and passing by all the fascinations of things seen, and rising above all the temptations of things temporal, his realising eye must fix upon the divine Father and see Him nearer and more clearly than these. You cannot walk with God unless you are emancipated from the dominion of sense and time, and are living by the power of that great faculty, which lays hold of the things that are unseen as the realities, and smiles at the false and forged pretensions of material things to be the real. We have to invert the teaching of the world and of our senses. My fingers and my eyes and my ears tell me that this gross, material universe about me is the real, and that all beyond it is shadowy and (sometimes we think) doubtful, or, at any rate, dim and far off. But that is false, and the truth is precisely the other way. The Unseen is the Real, and the Material is the merely Apparent. Behind all visible objects, and giving them all their reality, lies the unchangeable God.

Cultivate the faculty and habit of vigorous faith, if you would walk with God. For the world will put its bandages over your eyes, and try to tempt you to believe that these poor, shabby illusions are the precious things; and we have to shake ourselves free from its harlot kisses and its glozing lies, by very vigorous and continual efforts of the will and of the

Digitized by Google

understanding, if we are to make real to ourselves that which is real, the presence of our God.

Besides this vigorous exercise of the faculty of faith, there is another requisite for a walk with God, closely connected with it, and yet capable of being looked at separately, and that is, that we shall keep up the habit of continual occupation of thought with Him. That is very much an affair of habit with Christian people, and I am afraid that the neglect of it is the habitual practice of the bulk of professing Christians nowadays. It is hard, amidst all our work and thought and joys and sorrows, to keep fresh our consciousness of His presence, and to talk with Him in the midst of the rush of business. But what do we do about our dear ones when we are away from them? The measure of our love of them is accurately represented by the frequency of our remembrances of them. The mother parted from her child, the husband and the wife separated from one another, the lover and the friend, think of each other a thousand times a day. Whenever the spring is taken off, then the natural bent of the inclination and heart assert themselves, and the mind goes back again, as into a sanctuary, into the sweet thought. Is that how we do with God? Do we so walk with Him, as that thought, when released, instinctively sets in that direction? When I take off the break, does my spirit turn to God? If there is no hand at the helm, does the bow always point that way? When the magnet is withdrawn for a moment, does the needle tremble back and settle itself northwards? If we are walking with God, we shall, more times a day than we can count when the evening comes on, have had the thought of Him coming into our hearts 'like some sweet beguiling melody, so sweet

Digitized by Google

we know not we are listening to it.' Thus we shall 'walk with God.'

Then there is another requisite. 'How can two walk together except they be agreed?' 'He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself also so to walk even as He walked.' There is no union with God in such communion possible, unless there be a union with Him by conformity of will and submission of effort and aim to His commandments. Well, then, is that life possible for us? Look at this instance before us. We know very little about how much knowledge of God these people in old days had, but, at all events, it was a great deal less than you and I have. Their theology was very different from ours; their religion was absolutely identical with ours. Their faith, which grasped the God revealed in their creed, was the same as our faith, though the creed which their faith grasped was only an outline sketch of yours and mine. But at all times and in all generations, the element and essence of the religious life has been the same—that is, the realising sense of the living divine presence, the effort and aspiration after communion with Him, and the quiet obedience and conformity of the practical life to His will. And so we can reach out our hands across all the centuries to this pre-Noachian, antediluvian patriarch, dim amongst the mists, and feel that he too is our brother.

And he has set us the example that in all conditions of life, and under the most unfavourable circumstances, it is possible to live in this close touch with God. For in his time, not only was there, as I have said, an incomplete and rudimentary knowledge of God, but in his time the earth was filled with violence, and gigantic forms of evil are represented as having dominated man-

Digitized by Google

kind. Amidst it all, the Titanic pride, the godlessness, the scorn, the rudeness, and the violence, amidst it all, this one 'white flower of a blameless life' managed to find nutriment upon the dunghill, and to blossom fresh and fair there. You and I cannot, whatever may be our hindrances in living a consistent Christian life, have anything like the difficulties that this man had and surmounted. For us all, whatever our conditions, such a life is possible.

And then there is another lesson that he teaches us, viz. that such a life is consistent with the completest discharge of all common duties. The outline, as far as appearance was concerned, of this man's life was the same as the outline of those of his ancestors and successors. They are all described in the same terms. The formula is the same. Enoch lived, Mahalaleel, and all the rest of the half-unpronounceable names, they lived, they begat their heirs, and sons and daughters, and then they died. And the same formula is used about this man. He walked with God, but it was while treading the common path of secular life that he did so.

He found it possible to live in communion with God, and yet to do all the common things that men did then. Anybody's house may be a Bethel—a house of God—and anybody's work may be worship; and wherever we are and whatever we do, it is possible therein to serve God, and there to walk with Him.

2. And now a word about the crown of this life of communion. 'He was not, for God took him.'

What wonderful reticence in describing, or rather hinting at, the stupendous miracle that is here in question! Is that like a book that came from the legend-loving and legend-making brains of men; or

Digitized by Google

does it sound like the speech of God, to whom nothing is extraordinary and nothing needs to have a mark of admiration after it? It was the same to Him whether Enoch died or whether He simply took him to Himself. If one wants to know what men would have made of such a thing, if *they* had had to tell it, let them read those wretched Rabbinical fables that have been stitched on to this verse. There they will see how men describe miracles; and here they will see how God does so.

'*He was not.*' As I have said, he disappeared; that was what the world knew. 'God took him'; that was what God tells the world.

Thus this strange exception to the law of death stood, as I suppose, to the ancient world as doing somewhat the same office for them that the translation of Elijah afterwards partially did for Israel, and that the resurrection of Jesus Christ does completely for us, viz. it brought the future life into the realm of fact, and took it out of the dim region of speculation altogether. He establishes a truth who proves it, and he proves a fact that shows it. A doctrine of a future state is not worth much, but the fact of a future state, which was established by this incident then, and is certified for us all now, by the Christ risen from the dead, is all-important. Our gospel is all built upon facts, and this is the earliest fact in man's history which made man's subsistence in other conditions than that of earthly life a certainty.

And then, again, this wonderful exception shows to us, as it did to that ancient world, that the natural end of a religious life is union with God hereafter. It seems to me that the real proofs of a future life are two: one, the fact of Christ's resurrection, and the

Digitized by Google

other, the fact of our religious experience. For anything looks to me more likely, and less incredible, than that a man who could walk with God should only have a poor earthly life to do it in, and that all these aspirations, these emotions, should be bounded and ended by a trivial thing, that touches only the physical frame. Surely, surely, there is nothing so absurd as to believe that he who can say 'Thou art my God,' and who has said it, should ever by anything be brought to cease to say it. Death cannot kill love to God; and the only end of the religious life of earth is its perfecting in heaven. The experiences that we have here, in their loftiness and in their incompleteness, equally witness for us, of the rest and the perfectness that remain for the children of God.

Then, again, this man in his unique experience was, and is, a witness of the fact that death is an excrescence, and results from sin. I suppose that he trod the road which the divine intention had destined to be trodden by all the children of men, if they had not sinned; and that his experience, unique as it is, is a survival, so to speak, of what was meant to be the law for humanity, unless there had intervened the terrible fact of sin and its wages, death. The road had been made, and this one man was allowed to travel along it that we might all learn, by the example of the exception, that the rule under which we live was not the rule that God originally meant for us, and that death has resulted from the fact of transgression. No doubt Enoch had in him the seeds of it, no doubt there were the possibilities of disease and the necessity of death in his physical frame, but God has shown us in that one instance, and in the other of the great prophet's, how *He* is not subject to the law that men shall die,

Digitized by Google

although men are subject to it, and that if He will, He can take them all to Himself, as He did take these two, and will take them who, at last, shall not die but be changed.

Let me remind you that this unique and exceptional end of a life of communion may, in its deepest, essential character, be experienced by each of us. There are two passages in the book of Psalms, both of which I regard as allusions to this incident. The one of them is in the forty-ninth Psalm and reads thus: 'He will deliver my soul from the power of the grave, for He will take me.' Our version conceals the allusion, by its unfortunate and non-literal rendering 'receive.' The same word is employed there as here. Can we fail to see the reference? The Psalmist expects his soul to be 'delivered from the power of the grave,' because God *takes* it.

And again, in the great seventy-third Psalm, which marks perhaps the highwater mark of pre-Christian anticipations of a future state, we read: 'Thou wilt guide me by Thy counsel, and afterwards *take* me' (again the same word) 'to glory.' Here, again, the Psalmist looks back to the unique and exceptional instance, and in the rapture and ecstasy of the faith that has grasped the living God as his portion, says to himself: 'Though the externals of Enoch's end and of mine may differ, their substance will be the same, and I, too, shall cease to be seen of men, because God takes me into the secret of His pavilion, by the loving clasp of His lifting hand.'

Enoch was led, if I may say so, round the top of the valley, beyond the head waters of the dark river, and was kept on the high level until he got to the other side. You and I have to go down the hill, out of the sunshine, in among the dank weeds, to stumble over

Digitized by Google

the black rocks, and wade through the deep water; but we shall get over to the same place where he stands, and He that took him round by the top will 'take' us through the river; and so shall we 'ever be with the Lord.'

'Enoch walked with God and he was not; for God took him.' This verse is like some little spring with trees and flowers on a cliff. The dry genealogical table—and here this bit of human life in it! How unlike the others—they *lived* and they *died*; this man's life was walking with God and his departure was a fading away, a ceasing to be found here. It is remarkable in how calm a tone the Bible speaks of its supernatural events. We should not have known this to be a miracle but for the Epistle to the Hebrews.

The dim past of these early chapters carries us over many centuries. We know next to nothing about the men, where they lived, how they lived, what thoughts they had, what tongue they spoke. Some people would say that they never lived at all. I believe, and most of you, I suppose, believe that they did. But how little personality we give them! Little as we know of environment and circumstances, we know the main thing, the fact of their having been. Then we are sure that they had sorrow and joy, strife and love, toil and rest, like the rest of us, that whether their days were longer or shorter they were filled much as ours are, that whatever was the pattern into which the quiet threads of their life was woven it was, warp and weft, the same yarn as ours. In broad features every human life is much the same. Widely different as the clothing of these grey fathers in their tents, with their simple contrivances and brief records, is from that of cultivated busy Englishmen to-day, the same human form is beneath both.

Digitized by Google

And further, we know but little as to their religious ideas, how far they were surrounded with miracles, what they knew of God and of His purposes, how they received their knowledge, what served them for a Bible. Of what positive institutions of religion they had we know nothing; whether for them there was sacrifice and a sabbath day, how far the original gospel to Adam was known or remembered or understood by them. All that is perfectly dark to us. But this we know, that those of them who were godly men lived by the same power by which godly men live nowadays. Whatever their creed, their religion was ours. Religion, the bond that unites again the soul to God, has always been the same.

THE SAINT AMONG SINNERS

'These are the generations of Noah: Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God. And Noah begat three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted His way upon the earth. And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth. Make thee an ark of gopher wood; rooms shalt thou make in the ark, and shalt pitch it within and without with pitch. And this is the fashion which thou shalt make it of: The length of the ark shall be three hundred cubits, the breadth of it fifty cubits, and the height of it thirty cubits. A window shalt thou make to the ark, and in a cubit shalt thou finish it above; and the door of the ark shalt thou set in the side thereof; with lower, second, and third stories shalt thou make it. And, behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven; and every thing that is in the earth shall die. But with thee will I establish My covenant; and thou shalt come into the ark, thou, and thy sons, and thy wife, and thy sons' wives with thee. And of every living thing of all flesh, two of every sort shalt thou bring into the ark, to keep them alive with thee; they shall be male and female. Of fowls after their kind, and of cattle after their kind, of every creeping thing of the earth after his kind, two of every sort shall come unto thee, to keep them alive. And take thou unto thee of all food that is eaten, and thou shalt gather it to thee; and it shall be for food for thee, and for them. Thus did Noah; according to all that God commanded him, so did he.'—GENESIS vi. 9-22.

1. NOTICE here, first, the solitary saint. Noah stands alone 'in his generations' like some single tree, green

Digitized by Google

and erect, in a forest of blasted and fallen pines. 'Among the faithless, faithful only he.' His character is described, so to speak, from the outside inwards. He is 'righteous,' or discharging all the obligations of law and of his various relationships. He is 'perfect.' His whole nature is developed, and all in due symmetry and proportion; no beauty wanting, no grace cultivated at the expense of others. He is a full man; not a one-sided and therefore a distorted one. Of course we do not take these words to imply sinlessness. They express a relative, not an absolute, completeness. Hence we may learn both a lesson of stimulus and of hope. We are not to rest satisfied with partial goodness, but to seek to attain an all-round perfectness, even in regard to the graces least natural to our dispositions. And we can rejoice to believe that God is generous in His acceptance and praise. He does not grudge commendation, but takes account of the deepest desires and main tendencies of a life, and sees the germ as a full-blown flower, and the bud as a fruit.

Learn, too, that solitary goodness is possible. Noah stood uninfected by the universal contagion; and, as is always the case, the evil around, which he did not share, drove him to a more rigid abstinence from it. A Christian who is alone 'in his generations,' like a lily among nettles, has to be, and usually is, a more earnest Christian than if he were among like-minded men. The saints in 'Cæsar's household' needed to be very unmistakable saints, if they were not to be swept away by the torrent of godlessness. It is hard, but it is possible, for a boy at school, or a young man in an office, or a soldier in a barrack, to stand alone, and be Christlike; but only on condition that he

Digitized by Google

yields to no temptation to drop his conduct to the level around him, and is never guilty of compromise. Once yield, and all is over. Flowers grow on a dung-hill, and the very reeking rottenness may make the bloom finer.

Learn, too, that the true place for the saint is 'in his generations.' If the mass is corrupt, so much the more need to rub the salt well in. Disgust and cowardice, and the love of congenial society, keep Christian people from mixing with the world, which they must do if they are to do Christ's work in it. There is a great deal too much union with the world, and a great deal too much separation from it, now-adays, and both are of the wrong sort. We cannot keep too far away from it, by abstinence from living by its maxims, and tampering with its pleasures. We cannot mix too much with it if we take our Christianity with us, and remember our vocation to be its light.

Notice, again, the companion of the solitary saint. What beauty there is in that description of the isolated man, passing lonely amid his contemporaries, like a stream of pure water flowing through some foul liquid, and untouched by it, and yet not alone in his loneliness, because 'he walked with God!' The less he found congenial companionship on earth, the more he realised God as by his side. The remarkable phrase, used only of Enoch and of Noah, implies a closer relation than the other expression, 'To walk before God.' Communion, the habitual occupation of mind and heart with God, the happy sense of His presence making every wilderness and solitary place glad because of Him, the child's clasping the father's hand with his tiny fingers, and so being held up and

Digitized by Google

lifted over many a rough place, are all implied. Are we lonely in outward reality? Here is our unfailing companion. Have we to stand single among companions, who laugh at us and our religion? One man, with God to back him, is always in the majority. Though surrounded by friends, have we found that, after all, we live and suffer, and must die alone? Here is the all-sufficient Friend, if we have fellowship with whom our hearts will be lonely no more.

Observe that this communion is the foundation of all righteousness in conduct. Because Noah walked with God, he was 'just' and 'perfect.' If we live habitually in the holy of holies, our faces will shine when we come forth. If we desire to be good and pure, we must dwell with God, and His Spirit will pass into our hearts, and we shall bear the fragrance of his presence wherever we go. Learn, also, that communion with God is not possible unless we are fighting against our sin, and have some measure of holiness. We begin communion with Him, indeed, not by holiness, but by faith. But it is not kept up without the cultivation of purity. Sin makes fellowship with God impossible. 'Can two walk together, except they be agreed?' 'What communion hath light with darkness?' The delicate bond which unites us in happy communion with God shrivels up, as if scorched, at the touch of sin. 'If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie.'

2. Notice the universal apostasy. Two points are brought out in the sombre description. The first is moral corruption; the second, violence. Bad men are cruel men. When the bonds which knit society to God are relaxed, selfishness soon becomes furious,

Digitized by Google

and forcibly seizes what it lusts after, regardless of others' rights. Sin saps the very foundations of social life, and makes men into tigers, more destructive to each other than wild beasts. All our grand modern schemes for the reformation of society will fail unless they begin with the reformation of the individual. To walk with God is the true way to make men gentle and pitying.

Learn from this dark outline that God gazes in silence on the evil. That is a grand, solemn expression, 'Corrupt before God.' All this mad riot of pollution and violence is holding its carnival of lust and blood under the very eye of God, and He says never a word. So is it ever. Like some band of conspirators in a dark corner, bad men do deeds of darkness, and fancy they are unseen, and that God forgets *them*, because they forget God; and all the while His eye is fixed on them, and the darkness is light about them. Then comes a further expression of the same thought: 'God looked upon the earth.' As a sudden beam of sunshine out of a thunder-cloud, His eye flashes down, not as if He then began to know, but that His knowledge then began, as it were, to act.

3. What does the stern sentence on the rotten world teach us? A very profound truth, not only of the certain divine retribution, but of the indissoluble connection of sin with destruction. The same word is thrice employed in verses 11 and 12 to express 'corruption,' and in verse 13 to express 'destruction.' A similar usage is found in 1 Corinthians iii. 17, where the same Greek word is translated 'defile' and 'destroy.' This teaches us that, in deepest reality, corruption is destruction, that sin is death, that every sinner is a suicide. God's act in punishment corresponds to, and

Digitized by Google

is the inevitable outcome of, our act in transgression. So fatal is all evil, that one word serves to describe both the poison-secreting root and the poisoned fruit. Sin is death in the making; death is sin finished.

The promise of deliverance, which comes side by side with the stern sentence, illustrates the blessed truth that God's darkest threatenings are accompanied with a revelation of the way of escape. The ark is always shown along with the flood. Zoar is pointed out when God foretells Sodom's ruin. We are no sooner warned of the penalties of sin, than we are bid to hear the message of mercy in Christ. The brazen serpent is ever reared where the venomous snakes bite and burn.

4. We pass by the details of the construction of the ark to draw the final lesson from the exact obedience of Noah. We have the statement twice over, He did 'according to all that God commanded him.' It was no easy thing for him to build the ark, amidst the scoffing of his generations. Smart witticisms fell around him like hail. All the 'practical men' thought him a dreamy fool, wasting his time, while they prospered and made something of life. The Epistle to the Hebrews tells us the secret of his obedience: 'By faith, Noah,' etc. He realised the distant unseen, because he believed Him who warned him of it. The immediate object of his faith was 'the things not seen as yet'; but the real, deepest object was God, whose word showed him these. So faith is always trust in a divine Person, whether it lays hold of the past sacrifice, the present indwelling Spirit, or the future heaven.

Noah's example teaches us the practical effects of faith. 'Moved with godly fear,' says Hebrews; by

Digitized by Google

which is meant, not a mere dread of personal evil, for Noah was assured of safety—but that godly reverence and happy fear which dwells with faith, and secures precise obedience. Learn that a faith which does not work on the feelings is a very poor thing. Some Christian people have a great horror of emotional religion. Unemotional religion is a great deal worse. The road by which faith gets at the hands is through the heart. And he who believes but feels nothing, will do exactly as much as he feels, and probably does not really believe much more.

So after Noah's emotion followed his action. He was bid to prepare his ark, we have only to take refuge in the ark which God has prepared in Christ; but the principle of Noah's obedience applies to us all. He realised so perfectly that future, with its double prospect of destruction and deliverance, that his whole life was moulded by the conduct which should lead to his escape. The far-off flood was more real to him than the shows of life around him. Therefore he could stand all the gibes, and gave himself to a course of life which was sheer folly unless that future was real. Perhaps a hundred and twenty years passed between the warning and the flood; and for all that time he held on his way, nor faltered in his faith. Does our faith realise that which lies before us with anything like similar clearness? Do we see that future shining through all the trivial, fleeting present? Does it possess weight and solidity enough to shape our lives? Noah's creed was much shorter than ours; but I fear his faith was as much stronger.

5. We may think, finally, of the vindication of his faith. For a hundred and twenty years the wits

Digitized by Google

laughed, and the 'common-sense' people wondered, and the patient saint went on hammering and pitching at his ark. But one morning it began to rain; and by degrees, somehow, Noah did not seem quite such a fool. The jests would look rather different when the water was up to the knees of the jesters; and their sarcasms would stick in their throats as they drowned. So is it always. So it will be at the last great day. The men who lived for the future, by faith in Christ, will be found out to have been the wise men when the future has become the present, and the present has become the past, and is gone for ever; while they who had no aims beyond the things of time, which are now sunk beneath the dreary horizon, will awake too late to the conviction that they are outside the ark of safety, and that their truest epitaph is 'Thou fool!'

'CLEAR SHINING AFTER RAIN'

'And God remembered Noah, and every living thing, and all the cattle that was with him in the ark: and God made a wind to pass over the earth, and the waters asswaged; The fountains also of the deep and the windows of heaven were stopped, and the rain from heaven was restrained; And the waters returned from off the earth continually: and after the end of the hundred and fifty days the waters were abated. And the ark rested in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, upon the mountains of Ararat. And the waters decreased continually until the tenth month: in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, were the tops of the mountains seen. And it came to pass at the end of forty days that Noah opened the window of the ark which he had made: And he sent forth a raven, which went forth to and fro, until the waters were dried up from off the earth. Also he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters were abated from off the face of the ground; But the dove found no rest for the sole of her foot, and she returned unto him into the ark, for the waters were on the face of the whol earth: then he put forth his hand, and took her, and pulled her in unto him into the ark. And he stayed yet other seven days; and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark; And the dove came in to him in the evening; and, lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf pluckt off: so Noah knew that the waters were abated from off the earth. And he stayed yet other seven days; and sent forth the dove; which returned not again unto him any more. And it came to pass in the six hundredth and first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from off the earth: and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and, behold, the face of the ground was dry. And in the second month, on the

Digitized by Google

seven and twentieth day of the month, was the earth dried. And God spake unto Noah, saying, Go forth of the ark, thou, and thy wife, and thy sons, and thy sons' wives with thee. Bring forth with thee every living thing that is with thee, of all flesh, both of fowl, and of cattle, and of every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth; that they may breed abundantly in the earth, and be fruitful, and multiply upon the earth. And Noah went forth, and his sons, and his wife, and his sons' wives with him: Every beast, every creeping thing, and every fowl, and whatsoever creepeth upon the earth, after their kinds, went forth out of the ark. And Noah builded an altar unto the Lord; and took of every clean beast, and of every clean fowl, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And the Lord smelled a sweet savour; and the Lord said in His heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done. While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.'—GENESIS viii. 1-22.

THE universal tradition of a deluge is most naturally accounted for by admitting that there was a 'universal deluge.' But 'universal' does not apply to the extent as embracing the whole earth, but as affecting the small area then inhabited—an area which was probably not greater than the valleys of the Euphrates and Tigris. The story in Genesis is the Hebrew version of the universal tradition, and its plain affinity to the cuneiform narratives is to be frankly accepted. But the relationship of these two is not certain. Are they mother and daughter, or are they sisters? The theory that the narrative in Genesis is derived from the Babylonian, and is a purified, elevated rendering of it, is not so likely as that both are renderings of a more primitive account, to which the Hebrew narrative has kept true, while the other has tainted it with polytheistic ideas. In this passage the cessation of the flood is the theme, and it brings out both the love of the God who sent the awful punishment, and the patient godliness of the man who was spared from it. So it completes the teaching of the flood, and proclaims that God 'in wrath remembers mercy.'

1. 'God remembered Noah.' That is a strong 'anthropomorphism,' like many other things in Genesis—very natural when these records were written, and

Digitized by Google

bearing a true meaning for all times. It might seem as if, in the wild rush of the waters from beneath and from above, the little handful in the ark were forgotten. Had the Judge of all the earth, while executing 'terrible things in righteousness,' leisure to think of them who were 'afar off upon the sea'? Was it a blind wrath that had been let loose? No; in all the severity there was tender regard for those worthy of it. Judgment was discriminating. The sunshine of love broke through even the rain-clouds of the flood.

So the blessed lesson is taught that, in the widest sweep of the most stormy judgments, there are those who abide safely, fearing no evil. Though the waters are out, there is a rock on which we may stand safe, above their highest wave. And why did God 'remember Noah'? It was not favouritism, arbitrary and immoral. Noah was bid to build the ark, because he was 'righteous' in a world of evil-doers; he was 'remembered' in the ark, because he had believed God's warning, obeyed God's command as seeing the judgment 'not seen as yet,' and so 'became heir of the righteousness which is by faith.' They who trust God, and, trusting Him, realise as if present the future judgment, and, 'moved with fear,' take refuge in the ark, are never forgot by Him, even while the world is drowned. They live in His heart, and in due time He will show that He remembers them.

2. The gradual subsidence of the flood is told with singular exactitude of dates, which are certainly peculiar if they are not historical. The slow decrease negatives the explanation of the story as being the exaggerated remembrance of some tidal-wave caused by earthquake and the like. Precisely five months

Digitized by Google

after the flood began, the ark grounded, and the two sources, the rain from above and the 'fountains of the deep' (that is, probably, the sea), were 'restrained,' and a high wind set in. That date marked the end of the increase of the waters, and consequently the beginning of their decrease. Seven months and ten days elapsed between it and the complete restoration of the earth to its previous condition. That time was divided into stages. Two months and a half passed before the highest land emerged; two months more and the surface was all visible; a month and twenty-seven days more before 'the earth was dry.' The frequent recurrence of the sacred numbers, seven and ten, is noticeable. The length of time required for the restorative process witnesses to the magnitude of the catastrophe, impresses the imagination, and suggests the majestic slowness of the divine working, and how He uses natural processes for His purposes of moral government, and rules the wildest outbursts of physical agents. The Lord as king 'sitteth upon the flood,' and opens or seals the fountains of the great deep as He will. Scripture does not tell of the links between the First Cause and the physical effect. It brings the latter close up to the former. The last link touches the fixed staple, and all between may be ignored.

But the patient expectance of Noah comes out strongly in the story, as well as the gradualness of God's working. Not till 'forty days'—a round number—after the land appeared, did He do anything. He waited quietly till the path was plain. Eager impatience does not become those who trust in God. It is not said that the raven was sent out to see if the waters were abated. No purpose is named, nor is it said that it returned at all. 'To and fro' may mean

Digitized by Google

over the waste of waters, not back and forward to and from the ark. The raven, from its blackness, its habit of feeding on carrion, its fierceness, was a bird of ill-omen, and sending it forth has a grim suggestion that it would find food enough, and 'rest for the sole of its foot,' among the swollen corpses floating on the dark waters. The dove, on the other hand, is the emblem of gentleness, purity, and tenderness. She went forth, the very embodiment of meek hope that wings its way over dark and desolate scenes of calamity and judgment, and, though disappointed at first, patiently waits till the waters sink further, discerns the earliest signs of their drying up, and comes back to the sender with a report which is a prophecy: 'Your peace shall return to you again.' Happy they who send forth, not the raven, but the dove, from their patient hearts. Their gentle wishes come back with confirmation of their hopes, 'as doves to their windows.'

3. But Noah did not leave the ark, though 'the earth was dry.' God had 'shut him in,' and it must be God who brings him out. We have to take heed of precipitate departure from the place where He has fixed us. Like Israel in the desert, it must be 'at the commandment of the Lord' that we pitch the camp, and at the commandment of the Lord that we journey. Till He speaks we must remain, and as soon as He speaks we must remove. 'God spake unto Noah, saying, Go forth . . . and Noah went forth.' Thus prompt must be our obedience. A sacrifice of gratitude is the fit close of each epoch in our lives, and the fit beginning of each new one. Before he thought of anything else, Noah built his altar. All our deeds should be set in a golden ring of thankfulness. So the past is hallowed, and the future secure of God's protection. It is no

Digitized by Google

unworthy conception of God which underlies the strongly human expression that he 'smelled the sweet savour.' He delights in our offerings, and our trustful, grateful love is 'an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable' to Him. The pledge that He will not any more curse the ground for man's sake is occasioned by the sacrifice, but is grounded on what seems, at first sight, a reason for the very opposite conclusion. Man's evil heart the reason for God's forbearance? Yes, because it is 'evil *from his youth*.' He deals with men as knowing our frame, the corruption of our nature, and the need that the tree should be made good before it can bring forth good fruit. Therefore He will not smite, but rather seek to draw to repentance by His goodness, and by the faithful continuance of His beneficence in the steadfast covenant of revolving seasons, 'filling our hearts with food and gladness.'

THE SIGN FOR MAN AND THE REMEMBRANCER FOR GOD

'And God spake unto Noah, and to his sons with him, saying, And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you; And with every living creature that is with you, of the fowl, of the cattle, and of every beast of the earth with you; from all that go out of the ark, to every beast of the earth. And I will establish my covenant with you; neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth. And God said, This is the token of the covenant which I make between Me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I do set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between Me and the earth. And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud: And I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh. And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth. And God said unto Noah, This is the token of the covenant, which I have established between Me and all flesh that is upon the earth.'

GENESIS ix. 8-17.

THE previous verses of this chapter lay down the outlines of the new order which followed the flood.

Digitized by Google

The blessing and the command to be fruitful are repeated. The dominion over animals is confirmed, but enlarged by the permission to use them as food, and by the laying on them of 'the terror of you and the dread of you.' The sanctity of human life is laid down with great emphasis. Violence and bloodshed had brought about the flood. The appalling destruction effected by it might lead to the mistaken notion that God held man's life cheap. Therefore the corner-stone of future society is laid in that declaration that life is inviolable. These blessings and commands are followed by this remarkable section, which deals with God's covenant with Noah, and its token in the rainbow.

1. The covenant is stated, and the parties concerned in it enumerated in verses 3-11. When Noah came forth from the ark, after the stupendous act of divine justice, he must have felt that the first thing he needed was some assurance as to the footing on which he and the new world round him stood with God. The flood had swept away the old order. It had revealed terrible possibilities of destruction in nature, and terrible possibilities of wrath in God. Was any knowledge of His intentions and ways possible? Could continuance of the new order be counted on? The answer to such questions was—God's covenant. Now, as then, when any great convulsions shake what seems permanent, and bring home to men the thinness of the crust of use and wont roofing an infinite depth of unknown possibilities of change, on which we walk, the heart cries out for some assurance of perpetuity, and some revelation of God's mind. We can have such, as truly as Noah had, if we use the Revelation given us in Jesus.

Digitized by Google

In God's covenant with Noah, the fact of the covenant may first be noted. What is a covenant? The term usually implies a reciprocal bond, both parties to which come under obligations by it, each to the other. But, in this case, there are no obligations on the part of man or of the creatures. This covenant is God's only. It is contingent on nothing done by the recipients. He binds Himself, whatever be the conduct of men. This covenant is the self-motived promise of an unconditional mercy. May we not say that the 'New Covenant' in Jesus Christ is after the pattern of this, rather than after the manner of compacts which require both parties to do their several parts?

But note the great thought, that God limits His freedom of action by this definite promise. Noah was not left to grope in dread among the terrible possibilities opened by the flood. God marked out the line on which He would move, and marked off a course which He would not pursue. It is like a king giving his subjects a constitution. Men can reckon on God. He has let them know much of the principles and methods of His government. He has buoyed out His course, as it were, on the ocean, or pricked it down upon a chart. We have not to do with arbitrary power, with inscrutable will. Our God is not one who 'giveth no account of any of His matters.' To use a common saying, 'We know where to have Him.'

The substance of this covenant is noteworthy. It is concerned solely with physical nature. There is nothing spiritual or 'religious' about it. There are to be no more universal deluges. That is all which it guarantees. But consider how important such an

Digitized by Google

assurance was in two aspects. Note the solemn light which it threw on the past. It taught that the flood was an exception in the divine government, which should stand unrepeated for ever, in its dread pre-eminence testifying how awful it was as a judicial act, and how outrageous had been the guilt which it drowned out of existence and sight. A wholesome terror at the unexampled act of judgment would fill the hearts of the little group which now represented mankind.

Consider the effect of the covenant in encouraging hope. We have said that the one thing needful for Noah was some assurance that the new order would last. He was like a man who has just been rescued from an earthquake or a volcanic eruption. The ground seems to reel beneath him. Old habitudes have been curled up like leaves in the fire. Is there to be any fixity, any ground for continuous action, or for labour for a moment beyond the present? Is it worth while to plant or sow? Men who have lived through national tempests or domestic crashes know how much they need to be steadied afterwards by some reasonable assurance of comparative continuity. And these men, in the childhood of the race, would need it much. So they were sent out to till the earth, and to begin again strenuous lives, with this covenant to keep them from falling into a hand-to-mouth style of life, which would have brought them down to barbarism. We all need the same kind of assurance; and then, when we get it, such is the weakness of humanity, we are tempted to think that continuity means eternity, and that, because probably to-morrow shall be as this day, there will never come a to-morrow which shall be quite unlike to-day. The crust

Digitized by Google

of cooled earth, on which we walk, is thick enough to bear man and all his works, but there comes a time when it will crack. The world will not be flooded again, but we forget, what Noah did not know, that it will be burned.

The parties to the covenant must be noticed. Note how frequently the share in it, which all living creatures have, is referred to in the context. In verse 10 the language becomes strained (in the original), in order to express the universal participation of all living creatures; and in verse 13 'the earth' itself is spoken of as one party. God recognises obligations to all living things, and even to the dumb, non-sentient earth. He will not causelessly quench one bright, innocent life, nor harm one clod. Surely this is, at least, an incipient revelation of a God whose 'tender mercies are over all his works.' He 'doth take care for oxen'; and man, with all the creatures that are with him, and all the wild ones that 'come not near' him, and all the solid structure of the world, are held in one covenant of protecting and sustaining providence and power.

2. The sign of the covenant is described at great length in verses 12-17. Note that verses 12, 13 state the general idea of a token or sign, that verses 14-16 deepen this by stating that the token to man is a reminder to God, and that verse 17 sums up the whole with emphatic repetition of the main points. The narrative does not imply, as has often been supposed, that the rainbow was visible for the first time after the deluge. To suppose that, is to read more into the story than is there, or than common sense tolerates. If there were showers and sunshine, there must have been rainbows. But the fair vision strode

Digitized by Google

across the sky with no articulate promise in its loveliness, though it must always have kindled wonder, and sometimes stirred deeper thoughts. Now, for the first time, it was made 'a sign,' the visible pledge of God's promise.

Mark the emphasis with which God's agency is declared and His ownership asserted. '*I* do set *My* bow.' Neither Noah nor the writer knew anything about refraction or the prismatic spectrum. But perhaps they knew more about the rainbow than people do who know all about how it comes, except that God sets it in the cloud, and that it is His. Let us have the facts which science labels as such, by all means, and the more the better; but do not let us forget that there are other facts in nature which science has no means of attaining, but which are as solid and a great deal deeper than those which it supplies.

The natural adaptation of the rainbow for this office of a token is too plain to need dwelling on. It 'fills the sky when storms prepare to part,' and hence is a natural token that the downpour is being stayed. Somewhere there must be a bit of blue through which the sun can pierce; and the small gap, which is large enough to let it out, will grow till all the sky is one azure dome. It springs into sight in front of the cloud, without which it could not be, so it typifies the light which may glorify judgments, and is born of sorrows borne in the presence of God. It comes from the sunshine smiting the cloud; so it preaches the blending of love with divine judgment. It unites earth and heaven; so it proclaims that heavenly love is ready to transform earthly sorrows. It stretches across the land;

Digitized by Google

so it speaks of an all-embracing care, which enfolds the earth and all its creatures.

It is not only a 'sign to men.' It is also, in the strong anthropomorphism of the narrative, a remembrancer to God. Of course this is accommodation of the representation of His nature to the limitations of ours. And the danger of attaching unworthy ideas to it is lessened by noticing that He is said to set His bow in the cloud, before it acts as His remembrancer. Therefore, He had remembered before it appeared. The truth, conveyed in the childlike language, is that God has His covenant ever before Him, and that He responds to and honours the appeal made to Him, by that which He has Himself appointed for a sign to men. The expectant eyes of the trustful man and the eye of God meet, as it were, in looking on the sign. On earth it nourishes faith; in heaven it moves to love and blessing. God can be reminded of what He always remembers. The rainbow reminds Him of His covenant by its calm light. Jesus Christ reminds Him of His grace by His intercession before the throne. We remind Him of His plighted faithfulness by our prayers. 'Ye that are the Lord's remembrancers, keep not silence.'

AN EXAMPLE OF FAITH

'Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. So Abram departed, as the Lord had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him: and Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran; and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came. And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Sichem, unto the plain of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land. And the Lord appeared unto Abram, and

Digitized by Google

said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the Lord, who appeared unto him. And he removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Beth-el, and pitched his tent, having Beth-el on the west, and Hai on the east: and there he builded an altar unto the Lord, and called upon the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed, going on still toward the south.'

GENESIS xii. 1-9.

I

WE stand here at the well-head of a great river—a narrow channel, across which a child can step, but which is to open out a broad bosom that will reflect the sky and refresh continents. The call of Abram is the most important event in the Old Testament, but it is also an eminent example of individual faith. For both reasons he is called 'the Father of the Faithful.' We look at the incident here mainly from the latter point of view. It falls into three parts.

1. The divine voice of command and promise.—God's servants have to be separated from home and kindred, and all surroundings. The command to Abram was no mere arbitrary test of obedience. God could not have done what He meant with him, unless He had got him by himself. So Isaiah (li. 2) put his finger on the essential when he says, 'I called him alone.' God's communications are made to solitary souls, and His voice to us always summons us to forsake friends and companions, and to go apart with God. No man gets speech of God in a crowd. If you desired to fill a person with electricity, you used to put him on a stool with glass legs, to keep him from earthly contact. If the quickening impulse from the great magnet is to charge the soul, that soul must be isolated. 'He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me.'

The vagueness of the command is significant. Abram did not know 'whither he went.' He is not told that Canaan is the land, till he has reached

Digitized by Google

Canaan. A true obedience is content to have orders enough for present duty. Ships are sometimes sent out with sealed instructions, to be opened when they reach latitude and longitude so-and-so. That is how we are all sent out. Our knowledge goes no farther ahead than is needful to guide our next step. If we 'go out' as He bids us, He will show us what to do next.

'I do not ask to see
The distant scene; one step enough for me.'

Observe the promise. We may notice that it needed a soul raised above the merely temporal to care much for such promises. They would have been but thin diet for earthly appetites. 'A great nation'; a divine blessing; to be a source of blessing to the whole world, and a touchstone by their conduct to which men would be blessed or cursed;—what was there in these to fascinate a man, unless he had faith to teach him the relative importance of the earthly and the heavenly, the present and the future? Notice that the whole promise appeals to unselfish desires. It is always, in some measure, elevating to live for a future, rather than a present, good; but if it be only the same kind of good as the present would yield, it is a poor affair. The only really ennobling faith is one which sets before itself a future full of divine blessing, and of diffusion of that blessing through us, and which therefore scorns delights, and for such gifts is content to be solitary and a wanderer.

2. The obedience of faith.—We have here a wonderful example of prompt, unquestioning obedience to a bare word. We do not know how the divine command was conveyed to Abram. We simply read, 'The Lord

Digitized by Google

said'; and if we contrast this with verse 7, 'The Lord appeared . . . and said,' it will seem probable that there was no outward sign of the divine will. The patriarch knew that he was following a divine command, and not his own purpose; but there seems to have been no appeal to sense to authenticate the inward voice. He stands, then, on a high level, setting the example of faith as unconditional acceptance of, and obedience to, God's bare word.

Observe that faith, which is the reliance on a person, and therefore trust in his word, passes into both forms of confidence in that word as promise, and obedience to that word as command. We cannot cut faith in halves, and exercise the one aspect without the other. Some people's faith says that it delights in God's promises, but it does not delight in His commandments. That is no faith at all. Whoever takes God at His word, will take all His words. There is no faith without obedience; there is no obedience without faith.

We have already said enough about the separation which was effected by Abram's journey; but we may just notice that the departure from his father's house was but the necessary result of the gulf between them and him, which had been opened by his faith. They were idolaters; he worshipped one God. That drove them farther apart than the distance between Sichem and Haran. When sympathy in religion was at an end, the breach of all other ties was best. So to-day, whether there be outward separation or no, depends on circumstances; but every true Christian is parted from the dearest who is not a Christian, by an abyss wider than any outward distance can make. The law for us is

Digitized by Google

Abram's law, 'Get thee out.' Either our faith will separate us from the world, or the world will separate us from our faith and our God.

The companionship of Lot, who attaches himself to Abram, teaches that religion, in its true possessors, exercises an attractive influence over even common natures, and may win them to a loftier life. Some weak eyes may discern more glory in the sunshine tinting a poor bit of mist into ruddy light than in the beam which is too bright to look at. A faithful Abram will draw Lot after him.

'They went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came.' Compare this singular expression with chapter xi. 31, where we have Terah's emigration from Ur described in the same terms, with the all-important difference in the end, 'They came' not into Canaan, but 'unto Haran, and dwelt there.' Many begin the course; one finishes it. Terah's journeying was only in search of pasture and an abode. So he dropped his wider scheme when the narrower served his purpose. It was an easy matter to go from Ur to Haran. Both were on the same bank of the Euphrates. But to cross the broad, deep, rapid river was a different thing, and meant an irrevocable cutting loose from the past life. Only the man of faith did that. There are plenty of half-and-half Christians, who go along merrily from Ur to Haran; but when they see the wide stream in front, and realise how completely the other side is separated from all that is familiar, they take another thought, and conclude they have come far enough, and Haran will serve their turn.

Again, the phrase teaches us the certain issue of patient pilgrimage and persistent purpose. There is

Digitized by Google

no mystery in getting to the journey's end. 'One foot up, and the other foot down,' continued long enough, will bring to the goal of the longest march. It looks a weary journey, and we wonder if we shall ever get thither. But the magic of 'one step at a time' does it. The guide is also the upholder of our way. 'Every one of them appeareth before God in Zion.'

3. The life in the land.—The first characteristic of it is its continual wandering. This is the feature which the Epistle to the Hebrews marks as significant. There was no reason but his own choice why Abram should continue to journey, and prefer to pitch his tent now under the terebinth tree of Moreh, now by Hebron, rather than to enter some of the cities of the land. He dwelt in tents because he looked for the city. The clear vision of the future detached him, as it will always detach men, from close participation in the present. It is not because we are mortal, and death is near at the furthest, that the Christian is to sit loose to this world, but because he lives by the hope of the inheritance. He must choose to be a pilgrim, and keep himself apart in feeling and aims from this present. The great lesson from the wandering life of Abram is, 'Set your affection on things above.' Cultivate the sense of belonging to another polity than that in the midst of which you dwell. The Canaanites christened Abram 'The Hebrew' (Genesis xiv. 13), which may be translated 'The man from the other side.' That is the name which all true Christians should deserve. They should bear their foreign extraction in their faces, and never be naturalised subjects here. Life is wholesomer in the tent under the

Digitized by Google

spreading tree, with the fresh air blowing about us and clear sky above, than in the Canaanite city.

Observe, too, that Abram's life was permeated with worship. Wherever he pitches his tent, he builds an altar. So he fed his faith, and kept up his communion with God. The only condition on which the pilgrim life is possible, and the temptations of the world cease to draw our hearts, is that all life shall be filled with the consciousness of the divine presence, our homes altars, and ourselves joyful thankofferings. Then every abode is blessed. The undefended tent is a safe fortress, in which dwelling we need not envy those who dwell in palaces. Common tasks will then be fresh, full of interest, because we see God in them, and offer them up to Him. The wandering life will be a life of walking with God, and progressive knowledge of Him; and over all the roughnesses and the sorrows and the trivialities of it will be spread 'the light that never was on sea or land, the consecration' of God's presence, and the peacefulness of communion with Him.

Again, we may notice that the life of obedience was followed by fuller manifestations of God, and of His will. God 'appeared' when Abram was in the land. Is it not always true that obedience is blessed by closer vision and more knowledge? To him that hath shall be given; and he who has followed the unseen Guide through dimly discerned paths to an invisible goal, will be gladdened when he reaches the true Canaan, by the sight of Him whom, having not seen, he loved. Even here on earth obedience is the path to fuller knowledge; and when the pilgrims who have left all and followed the Captain of salvation through a deeper, darker stream than Abram

Digitized by Google

crossed, have touched the other side, God will appear to them, and say, as the enraptured eye gazes amazed on the goodly land, 'Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee.'

ABRAM AND THE LIFE OF FAITH

II

A GREAT act of renunciation at the divine call lies at the foundation of Israel's history, as it does at the foundation of every life that blesses the world or is worth living. The divine Word to Abram first gives the command in all its authoritativeness and plain setting forth of how much had to be surrendered, and then in its exuberant setting forth of how much was to be won by obedience. God does not hide the sacrifices that have to be made if we will be true to His command. He will enlist no recruits on false pretences. All ties of country, kindred, and father's house have to be loosened, and, if need be, to be cut, for His command is to be supreme, and clinging hands that would hold back the pilgrim have to be disengaged. If a man realises God's hold on him, he feels all others relaxed. The magnetism of the divine command overcomes gravitation, and lifts him high above earth. The life of faith ever begins as that of 'the Father of the Faithful' began, with the solemn recognition of a divine will which separates. Further, Abram saw plainly what he had to leave, but not what he was to win. He had to make a venture of faith, for 'the land that I will shew thee' was undefined. Certainly it was somewhere, but where was it? He

Digitized by Google

had to fling away substance for what seemed shadow to all but the eye of faith, as we all have to do. The familiar, undeniable good of the present has to be waived in favour of what 'common sense' calls a misty possibility in the future. To part with solid acres and get nothing but hopes of an inheritance in the skies looks like insanity, and is the only true wisdom. 'Get thee out' is plain; 'the land that I will shew thee' looks like the doubtful outlines seen from afar at sea, which may be but clouds.

But Abram had a great hope blazing in front, none the less bright or guiding because it all rested on the bare promise of God. It is the prerogative of faith to give solidity and reality to what the world thinks has neither. The wanderer who had left his country was to receive a land for his own; the solitary who had left his kindred was to become the founder of a nation; the unknown stranger was to win a great name, — and how wonderfully that has come true! Not only was he to be blessed, but also to be a blessing, for from him was to flow that which should bless all the earth,—and how transcendently that has come true! The attitude of men to him (and to the universal blessing that should descend from him) was to determine their position in reference to God and 'blessings' or 'cursings' from him. So the migration of Abram was a turning-point in universal history.

Obedience followed the command, immediate as the thunder on the flash, and complete. 'So Abram went, as the Lord had spoken unto him,'—blessed they of whose lives that may be the summing-up! Happy the life which has God's command at the back of every deed, and no command of His unobeyed! If our acts are closely parallel with God's speech to us, they

Digitized by Google

will prosper, and we shall be peaceful wherever we may have to wander. Success followed obedience in Abram's case, as in deepest truth it always does. That is a pregnant expression: 'They went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came.' A strange itinerary of a journey, which omits all but the start and the finish! And yet are these not the most important points in any journey or life,—whither it was directed and where it arrived? How little will the weary tramps in the desert be remembered when the goal has been reached! Dangers and privations soon pass from memory, and we shall think little of sorrows, cares, and pains, when we arrive at home. The life of faith is the only one which is always sure of getting to the place to which it seeks to journey. Others miss their aim, or drop dead on the road, like the early emigrants out West; Christian lives get to the city.

Once in the land, Abram was still a stranger and pilgrim. He first planted himself in its heart by Sichem, but outside the city, under the terebinth tree of Moreh. The reason for his position is given in the significant statement that 'the Canaanite was then in the land.' So he had to live in the midst of an alien civilisation, and yet keep apart from it. As Hebrews says, he was 'dwelling in tabernacles,' because he 'looked for a city.' The hope of the permanent future made him keep clear of the passing present; and we are to feel ourselves pilgrims and sojourners, not so much because earth is fleeting and we are mortal, as because our true affinities are with the unseen and eternal. But the presence of 'the Canaanite' is connected also with the following words, which tell that 'the Lord appeared unto Abram,' and now after his obedience

Digitized by Google

told him that this was the land that was to be his. He unfolds His purposes to those who keep His commandments; obedience is the mother of insight. The revelation put a further strain on faith, for the present occupiers of the land were many and strong; but it matters not how formidably and firmly rooted the Canaanite is, God's children can be sure that the promise will be fulfilled. We can calmly look on his power and reckon on its decay, if the Lord appears to us, as to Abram—and He surely will if we have followed His separating voice, and dwell as strangers here, because our hearts are with Him.

After the appearance of God and the promise, we have an outline of the pilgrim's life, as seen in Abram. He signalised God's further opening of His purposes, by building an altar on the place where He had been seen by him. Thankful recognition and commemoration of the times in our lives when He has most plainly drawn near and shown us glimpses of His will, are no less blessed than due, and they who thus rear altars to Him will wonder, when they come to count up how many they have had to build. But the life of faith is ever a pilgrim life, and Bethel has soon to be the home instead of Shechem. There, too, Abram keeps outside the city, and pitches his tent. There, too, the altar rises by the side of the tent. The transitory provision for housing the pilgrim contrasts with the solid structure for offering sacrifices. The tent is 'pitched,' and may be struck and carried away to-morrow, but the altar is 'builded.' That part of our lives which is concerned with the material and corporeal is, after all, short in duration and small in importance; that which has to do with God, His revelations, and His worship and service, lasts. What is left in ancient historic

Digitized by Google

lands, like Egypt or Greece, is the temples of the gods, while the huts of the people have perished long centuries ago. What we build for God lasts; what we pitch for ourselves is transient as we are.

GOING FORTH

'They went forth to go into the land of Canaan, and into the land of Canaan they came.'—GENESIS xii. 5.

I

THE reference of these words is to Abram's act of faith in leaving Haran and setting out on his pilgrimage. It is a strange narrative of a journey, which omits the journey altogether, with its weary marches, privations, and perils, and notes but its beginning and its end. Are not these the main points in every life, its direction and its attainment? There are—

> 'Two points in the adventure of the diver,
> One—when, a beggar, he prepares to plunge,
> One—when, a prince, he rises with his pearl.'

Abram and his company had a clear aim. But does not the Epistle to the Hebrews magnify him precisely because he 'went out, not knowing whither he went'? Both statements are true, for Abram had the same combination of knowledge and ignorance as we all have. He knew that he was to go to a land that he should afterwards inherit, and he knew that, in the first place, Canaan was to be his 'objective point,' but he did not know, till long after he had crossed the Euphrates and pitched his tent by Bethel, that it was the land. The ultimate goal was clear, and the first step towards it was plain, but how that first step was related to the goal was not plain, and all the steps

Digitized by Google

between were unknown. He went forth with sealed orders, to go to a certain place, where he would have further instructions. He knew that he was to go to Canaan, and beyond that point all was dark, except for the sparkle of the great hope that gleamed on the horizon in front, as a sunlit summit rises above a sea of mist between it and the traveller. Like such a traveller, Abram could not accurately tell how far off the shining peak was, nor where, in the intervening gorges full of mist, the path lay; but he plunged into the darkness with a good heart, because he had caught a glimpse of his journey's end. So with us. We may have clear before us the ultimate aim and goal of our lives, and also the step which we have to take now, in pressing towards it, while between these two there stretches a valley full of mist, the breadth of which may be measured by years or by hours, for all that we know, and the rough places and green pastures of which are equally hidden from us. We have to be sure that the mountain peak far ahead, with the sunshine bathing it, is not delusive cloud but solid reality, and we have to make sure that God has bid us step out on the yard of path which we *can* see, and, having secured these two certainties, we are to cast ourselves into the obscurity before us, and to bear in our hearts the vision of the end, to cheer us amid the difficulties of the road.

Life is strenuous, fruitful, and noble, in the measure in which its ultimate aim is kept clearly visible throughout it all. Nearer aims, prescribed by physical necessities, tastes, circumstances, and the like, are clear enough, but a melancholy multitude of us have never reflected on the further question: 'What then?' Suppose I have made my fortune, or won my wife, or

Digitized by Google

established my position, or achieved a reputation, behind all these successes lies the larger question. These are not ends but means, and it is fatal to treat them as being the goal of our efforts or the chief end of our being. There would be fewer wrecked lives, and fewer bitter and disappointed old men, if there were more young ones who, at starting, put clearly before themselves the question: 'What am I living for? and what am I going to do when I have secured the nearer aims necessarily prescribed to me?'

What that aim should be is not doubtful. The only worthy end befitting creatures with hearts, minds, consciences, and wills like ours is God Himself. Abram's 'Canaan' is usually regarded as an emblem of heaven, and that is correct, but the land of our inheritance is not wholly beyond the river, for God is the portion of our hearts. He *is* heaven. To dwell with Him, to have all the current of our being running towards Him, to set Him before us in the strenuous hours of effort and in the quiet moments of repose, in the bright and in the dark days, are the conditions of blessedness, strength, and peace.

That aim clearly apprehended and persistently pursued gives continuity to life, such as nothing else can do. How many of the things that drew us to themselves, and were for a while the objects of desire and effort, have sunk below the horizon! The lives that are not directed to God as their chief end are like the voyages of old-time sailors, who had to creep from one headland to another, and steer for points which, one after another, were reached, left behind, and forgotten. There is only one aim so great, so far in advance that we can never reach, and therefore can

Digitized by Google

never pass and drop it. Life then becomes a chain, not a heap of unrelated fragments. That aim made ours, stimulates effort to its highest point, and therefore secures blessedness. It emancipates from many bonds, and takes the poison out of the mosquito bites of small annoyances, and the stings of great sorrows. It gleams ever before a man, sufficiently attained to make him at rest, sufficiently unattained to give the joy of progress. The pilgrims who had but one single aim, 'to go to the land of Canaan,' were delivered from the miseries of conflicting desires, and with simplicity of aim came concentration of force and calm of spirit.

COMING IN

II

If life has a clear, definite aim, and especially if its aim is the highest, there will be detachment from, and abandonment of, many lower ones. Nothing worth doing is done, and nothing worth being is realised in ourselves, except on condition of resolutely ignoring much that attracts. 'They went forth'; Haran must be given up if Canaan is to be reached. Artists are content to pay the price for mastery in their art, students think it no hardship to remain ignorant of much in order to know their own subject thoroughly; men of business feel it no sacrifice to give up culture, leisure, and sometimes still higher things, such as love and purity, to win wealth. And we shall not be Christians after Christ's heart unless we practise similar restrictions. The stream that is to flow with impetus sufficient to scour its bed clear of obstructions must not be allowed to meander in side branches, but

Digitized by Google

be banked up in one channel. Sometimes there must be actual surrender and outward withdrawal from lower aims which, by our weakness, have become rival aims; always there must be subordination and detachment in heart and mind. The compass in an iron ship is disturbed by the iron, unless it has been adjusted; the golden apples arrest the runner, and there are clogs and weights in every life, which have to be laid aside if the race is to be won. The old pilgrim fashion is still the only way. We must do as Abram did: leave Haran and its idols behind us, and go forth, ready to dwell, if need be, in deserts, and as sojourners even when among cities, or we shall not reach the 'land that is very far off.' It is near us if we forsake self and the 'things seen and temporal,' but it recedes when we turn our hearts to these.

'Into the land of Canaan they came.' No man honestly and rightly seeks God and fails to find Him. No man has less goodness and Christ-likeness than he truly desires and earnestly pursues. Nearer aims are often missed, and it is well that they should be. We should thank God for disappointments, for hopes unfulfilled, or proving still greater disappointments when fulfilled. It is mercy that often makes the harvest from our sowing a scanty one, for so we are being taught to turn from the quest in which searching has no assurance of finding, to that in which to seek is to find. 'I have never said to any of the seed of Jacob, Seek ye me in vain.' We may not reach other lands which seem to us to be lands of promise, or when we do, may find that the land is 'evil and naughty,' but this land we shall reach, if we desire it, and if, desiring it, we go forth from this vain world. The Christian life is the only one which has no failures, no balked

Digitized by Google

efforts, no frustrated aims, no brave settings out and defeated returnings. The literal meaning of one of the Old Testament words for *sin* is missing the mark, and that embodies the truth that no man wins what he seeks who seeks satisfaction elsewhere than in God. Like the rivers in Asiatic deserts, which are lost in the sand and never reach the sea, all lives which flow towards anything but God are dissipated and vain.

But the supreme realisation of an experience like Abram's is reserved for another life. No pilgrim Zion-ward perishes in the wilderness, or loses his way or fails to come to 'the city of habitation.' 'They go from strength to strength, every one of them in Zion appeareth before God.' And when they appear there, they will think no more, just as this narrative says nothing, of the sandy, salt, waterless wildernesses, or the wearinesses, dangers, and toils of the road. The experience of the happy travellers, who have found all which they sought and are at home for ever in the fatherland towards which they journeyed, will all be summed up in this, that 'they went forth to go into the land of Canaan, and into the land of Canaan they came.'

THE MAN OF FAITH

'And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Sichem, unto the plain of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land. And the Lord appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the Lord, who appeared unto him.'—GENESIS xii. 6, 7.

GREAT epoch and man. Steps of Abram's training. First he was simply called to go—no promise of inheritance—obeyed—came to Canaan—found a thickly

Digitized by Google

peopled land with advanced social order, and received no divine vision till he was face to face with the Canaanite.

1. *God's bit-by-bit leading of us.*

How slowly the divine purpose was revealed—the trial before the promise—did not know where, nor that Canaan was land, but only told enough for his first march.

So with us—our ignorance of future is meant to have the effect of keeping us near God and training us to live a day at a time.

God's finger on the page points to a word at a time. Each day's route is given morning by morning in the order for the day.

2. *Obedience often brings us into very difficult places.*

Abram was ready to say, no doubt, 'This cannot be the land for me, peopled as it is with all these Canaanites.' We are ever ready to think that, if we find obstacles, we must have misunderstood God's directions, but 'many adversaries' often indicate an 'open door.'

3. *The presence of enemies brings the presence of God.*

This is the first time we read that God *appeared* to men.

As the darkness thickens, the pillar of fire brightens. But not only does God appear more clearly, but our spirits are more eager and therefore able to see Him. We are mercifully left to feel the enemies before we see Him present in His strength.

4. *The victory for us lies in the vision of God and of His loving purpose.*

How superb the confidence of 'Unto thy seed will I give *this* land.'

Digitized by Google

That vision is our true strength. And it will make us feel as pilgrims, which is in itself more than half the battle.

LIFE IN CANAAN

'And he removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Beth-el, and pitched his tent, having Beth-el on the west, and Hai on the east: and there he builded an altar unto the Lord, and called upon the name of the Lord.'
GENESIS xii. 8.

THESE are the two first acts of Abram in the land of Canaan.

1. *All life should blend earthly and heavenly.*

They are not to be separated. Religion should run through everything and take the whole of life for its field. Where we cannot carry it is no place for us. It is a shame that heathenism should be more penetrated by its religion than Christendom is.

2. *The family should be a church.*

Domestic religion. New Testament households. Abram a priest. The decay of family religion, worship, and instruction.

3. *The service to God should be more costly than to ourselves.*

Pitching a tent cheaper than building an altar. Give God the best. We build ourselves ceiled houses and the ark dwells in curtains. Pagans build elaborate temples, but their houses are hovels. Too many Christians do the opposite.

4. *Building for God lasts, for selves perishes.*

A tent is stricken, and no trace remains but embers. The stones of Jacob's altar may be standing yet. The Parthenon of Athens remains: where are the hovels of the people? 'He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.' Permanent results of transitory deeds.

Digitized by Google

THE IMPORTANCE OF A CHOICE

'And Abram went up out of Egypt, he, and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the south. And Abram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold. And he went on his journeys from the south even to Beth-el, unto the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Beth-el and Hai; Unto the place of the altar, which he had made there at the first: and there Abram called on the name of the Lord. And Lot also, which went with Abram, had flocks, and herds, and tents. And the land was not able to bear them, that they might dwell together: for their substance was great, so that they could not dwell together. And there was a strife between the herdmen of Abram's cattle and the herdmen of Lot's cattle: and the Canaanite and the Perizzite dwelled then in the land. And Abram said unto Lot, Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen; for we be brethren. Is not the whole land before thee? separate thyself, I pray thee, from me: if thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if thou depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left. And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered every where, before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, even as the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, as thou comest unto Zoar. Then Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan; and Lot journeyed east: and they separated themselves the one from the other. Abram dwelled in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelled in the cities of the plain, and pitched his tent toward Sodom. But the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly.'—GENESIS xiii. 1-13.

THE main lesson of this section is the wisdom of seeking spiritual rather than temporal good. That is illustrated on both sides. Prosperity attends Abram and Lot while they think more of obeying God than of flocks and herds. Lot makes a mistake, as far as this world is concerned, when he chooses his place of abode for the sake of its material advantages. But the introductory verses (vv. 1-4) suggest a question, and seem to teach an important lesson. Was Abram right in so soon leaving the land to which God had led him, and going down to Egypt? Was that not taking the bit between his teeth? He had been commanded to go to Canaan; should he not have stopped there—famine or no famine—till the same authority commanded him to leave the land? If God had put him there, should he not have trusted God to keep him alive in famine? The narrative seems to imply that his going to Egypt was a failure of faith. It gives no hint of a divine

Digitized by Google

voice leading him thither. We do not hear that he builded any altar beside his tent there, as he had done in the happier days of life by trust. His stay resulted in peril and in something very like lying, for which he had to bear the disgrace of being rebuked by an idolater, and having no word of excuse to offer. The great lesson of the whole section, and indeed of Abram's whole life, receives fresh illustration from the story thus understood, which preaches loudly that trust is safety and wellbeing, and that it is always sin and always folly to leave Canaan, where God has put us, even if there be a famine, and to go down into Egypt, even if its harvests be abundant.

But another lesson is also taught. After the interruption of the Egyptian journey, Abram had to begin all his Canaan life over again. Very emphatically the narrative puts it, that he went to 'the place where his tent had been at the beginning,' to the altar which he had made at the first. Yes! that is the only place for a man who has faltered and gone aside from the course of obedience. He must begin over again. The backsliding Christian has to resort anew to the place of the penitent, and to come to Christ, as he did at first for pardon. It is a solemn thought that years of obedience and heroisms of self-surrender, may be so annihilated by some act of self-seeking distrust that the whole career has, as it were, to be begun anew from the very starting-point. It is a blessed thought that, however far and long we may have wandered, we can always return to the place where we were at the beginning, and there call on the name of the Lord.

Note how we are taught here the great truth for the Old Testament, that outward prosperity follows most surely those who do not seek for it. Abram's wealth

Digitized by Google

has increased, and his companion, Lot, has shared in the prosperity. It is because he 'went with Abram' that he 'had flocks, and herds, and tents.' Of course, the connection between despising the world and possessing it is not thus close in New Testament times. But even now, one often sees that the men who *will* be rich fall into a pit of poverty, and that a heart set on higher things, which counts earthly advantages second and not first, wins a sufficiency of these most surely. Foxlike cunning, and wolf-like rapacity, and Devil-like selfishness, which make up a large portion of what the world calls 'great business capacity,' do not always secure the prize. But the real possession of earth and all its wealth depends to-day, as much as ever it did in Abram's times, on seeking 'first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness.' Only when we are Christ's are all things ours. They are ours, not by the vulgar way of what the world calls ownership, but in proportion as we use them to the highest ends of helping us to grow in wisdom and Christ-likeness, in the measure in which we subordinate them to heavenly good, in the degree in which we employ them as means of serving Christ. We can see the Pleiades best by not looking directly at, but somewhat away from, them; and just as pleasure, if made the direct object of life, ceases to be pleasure, so the world's goods, if taken for our chief aim, cease to yield even the imperfect good which they can bestow.

But now we have to look at the two dim figures which the remainder of this story presents to us, and which shine there, in that far-off past, types and instances of the two great classes into which men are divided,—Abram, the man of faith; Lot, the man of sense.

Mark the conduct of the man of faith. Why should

Digitized by Google

he, who has God's promise that all the land is his, squabble with his kinsman about pasture and wells? The herdsmen naturally would come to high words and blows, especially as the available land was diminished by the claims of the 'Canaanite and Perizzite.' But the direct effect of Abram's faith was to make him feel that the matter in dispute was too small to warrant a quarrel. A soul truly living in the contemplation of the future, and filled with God's promises, will never be eager to insist on its rights, or to stand on its dignity, and will take too accurate a measure of the worth of things temporal to get into a heat about them. The clash of conflicting interests, and the bad blood bred by them, seem infinitely small, when we are up on the height of communion with God. An acre or two more or less of grass land does not look all-important, when our vision of the city which hath foundations is clear. So an elevated calm and 'sweet reasonableness' will mark the man who truly lives by faith, and he will seek after the things that make for peace. Abram could fight, as Old Testament morality permitted, when occasion arose, as Lot found out to his advantage before long. But he would not strive about such trifles.

May we not venture to apply his words to churches and sects? They too, if they have faith strong and dominant, will not easily fall out with one another about intrusions on each other's territory, especially in the presence, as at this day, of the common foe. When the Canaanite and the Perizzite are in the land, and Unbelief in militant forms is arrayed against us, it is more than folly, it is sin, for brethren to be turning their weapons against each other. The common foe should make them stand shoulder to shoulder.

Digitized by Google

Abram's faith led, too, to the noble generosity of his proposal. The elder and superior gives the younger and inferior the right of option, and is quite willing to take Lot's leavings. Right or left—it mattered not to him; God would be with him, whichever way he went; and the glorious Beyond, for which he lived, blazed too bright before his inward sight to let him be very solicitous where he was. 'I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.' It does not matter much what accommodation we have on shipboard, when the voyage is so short. If our thoughts are stretching across the sea to the landing at home, and the welcome there, we shall not fight with our fellow-passengers about our cabins or places at the table. And notice what rest comes when faith thus dwindles the worth of the momentary arrangements here. The less of our energies are consumed in asserting ourselves, and scrambling for our rights, and cutting in before other people, so as to get the best places for ourselves, the more we shall have to spare for better things; and the more we live in the future, and leave God to order our ways, the more shall our souls be wrapped in perfect peace.

Mark the conduct of the man of sense. We can fancy the two standing on the barren hills by Bethel, from one of which, as travellers tell us, there is precisely the view which Lot saw. He lifted up his greedy eyes, and there, at his feet, lay that strange Jordan valley with its almost tropical richness, its dark lines of foliage telling of abundant water, the palm-trees of Jericho perhaps, and the glittering cities. Up there among the hills there was little to tempt,—rocks and scanty herbage; down below, it was like the lost Eden, or the Egypt from which they had but lately come.

Digitized by Google

What need for hesitation? True, the men of the plain were 'wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly,' as the chapter says with grim emphasis. But Lot evidently never thought about that. He knew it, though, and ought to have thought about it. It was his sin that he was guided in his choice only by considerations of temporal advantage. Put his action into words, and it says, 'Grass for my sheep is more to me than fellowship with God, and a good conscience.' No doubt he would have had salves enough. 'I do not need to become like them, though I live among them.' 'A man must look after his own interests.' 'I can serve God down there as well as up here.' Perhaps he even thought that he might be a missionary among these sinners. But at bottom he did not seek first the kingdom of God, but the other things.

We have seldom the choice put before us so dramatically and sharply; but it is as really presented to each. There is the shameless cynicism of the men who avowedly only ask the question, 'Will it pay?' But there are subtler forms which affect us all. It is the standing temptation of Englishmen to apply a money standard to everything, to adopt courses of action of which the only recommendation is that they promote getting on in the world. Men who call themselves Christians select schools for their children, or professions for their boys, or marriages for their daughters, down in Sodom, because it will give them a lift in life which they would not get up in the starved pastures at Bethel, with nobody but Abram and his like to associate with. If the earnestness with which men pursue an end is to be taken as any measure of its importance in their eyes, it certainly does not look much as if modern average Christians

Digitized by Google

did believe that it was of more moment to be united to God, and to be growing like Him, than to secure a good large share of earthly possessions. Tried by the test of conduct, their faith in getting on is a great deal deeper than their faith in getting up. But if our religion does not make us put the world beneath our feet, and count all things but loss that we may win Christ, we had better ask ourselves whether our religion is any better than Lot's, which was second-hand, and was much more imitation of Abram than obedience to God.

Lot teaches us that material good may tempt and conquer, even after it has once been overcome. His early life had been heroic; in his young enthusiasm, he had thrown in his portion with Abram in his great venture. He had not been thinking of his flocks when he left Haran. Probably, as I have just said, he was a good deal galvanised into imitation; but still, he had chosen the better part. But now he has tired of a pilgrim's life. There are men who cut down the thorns, and in whom the seed is sown; but thorns are tenacious of life, and quick growing, and so they spread over the field and choke the seed. It is easier to take some one bold step than to keep true through life to its spirit. Youth contemns, but too often middle-age worships, worldly success. The world tightens its grasp as we grow older, and Lot and Demas teach us that it is hard to keep for a lifetime on the heights. Faith, strong and ever renewed by communion, can do it; nothing else can.

Lot's history teaches what comes of setting the world first, and God's kingdom second. For one thing, the association with it is sure to get closer. Lot began with choosing the plain; then he crept a little nearer,

Digitized by Google

and pitched his tent 'towards' Sodom; next time we hear of him, he is living in the city, and mixed up inextricably with its people. The first false step leads on to connections unforeseen, from which the man would have shrunk in horror, if he had been told that he would make them. Once on the incline, time and gravity will settle how far down we go. We shall see, in subsequent sections, how far Lot's own moral character suffered from his choice. But we may so far anticipate the future narrative as to point out that it affords a plain instance of the great truth that the sure way to lose the world as well as our own souls, is to make it our first object. He would have been safe if he had stopped up among the hills. The shadowy Eastern kings who swooped down on the plain would never have ventured up there. But when we choose the world for our portion, we lay ourselves open to the full weight of all the blows which change and fortune can inflict, and come voluntarily down from an impregnable fastness to the undefended open.

Nor is this all; but at the last, when the fiery rain bursts on the doomed city, Lot has to leave all the wealth for which he has sacrificed conscience and peace, and escapes with bare life; he suffers loss even if he himself is 'saved as dragged through the fire.' The world passeth away and the lust thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever. The riches which wax not old, and need not to be left when we leave all things besides, are surely the treasures which the calmest reason dictates should be our chief aim. God is the true portion of the soul; if we have Him, we have all. So, let us seek Him first, and, with Him, all else is ours.

Digitized by Google

ABRAM THE HEBREW

'And there came one that had escaped, and told Abram the Hebrew.'
GENESIS xiv. 13.

THIS is a singular designation of Abram as 'The Hebrew.' Probably we have in its use here a trace of the customary epithet which he bore among the inhabitants of Canaan, and perhaps the presence of the name in this narrative may indicate the influence of some older account, traditional or written, which owed its authorship to some of them. At all events, this is the first appearance of the name in Scripture. As we all know, it has become that of the nation, but a Jew did not call himself a 'Hebrew' except in intercourse with foreigners. As in many other cases, the national name used by other nations was not that by which the people called themselves. Here, obviously, it is not a national name, for the very good reason that there was no nation then. It is a personal epithet, or, in plain English, a nickname, and it means, probably, as the ancient Greek translation of Genesis gives it, neither more nor less than 'The man from the other side,' the man that had come across the water. Just as a mediæval prince bore the *sobriquet* Outremere—the 'man from beyond the sea'—so Abram, to the aboriginal, or, at least, long-settled, inhabitants of the country, was known simply as the foreigner, the 'man from the other side' (of the Jordan, or more probably of the great river Euphrates), the man from across the water.

Now that name may suggest, with a permissible, and, I hope, not misleading play of fancy, just two things, which I seek now to press upon our hearts

Digitized by Google

and consciences. The one is as to how men become Christians, and the other is as to how they look to other people when they are.

1. Men become Christians by a great emigration.

'Get thee out from thy father's house, and from thy country, and from thy kindred,' was the command to Abram. And he became the heir to God's promises and the father of the faithful, because he did not hesitate a moment to make the plunge and to leave behind him all his past, his associations, his loves, much of his possessions, and, in a very profound sense, his old self, and put a great impassable gulf between him and them all.

Now I am not going to say anything so narrow or foolish as that the Christian life must always begin with a conscious and sudden change; but this I am quite sure of, that in the vast majority of cases of thoroughly and out-and-out religious men, there must be a conscious change, whether it has been diffused through months or years, or concentrated in one burning moment. There has been a beginning; whether it has been like the dawn, or whether it has been like the kindling of a candle, the beginning of the flashing of the divine light into the heart; and the men that are most really under the influence of religious truth can, as a rule, looking back upon their past experience, see that it divides itself into two halves, separated from each other by a profound gulf—the time on the other side, and that on this side, of the great river. We must take heed lest by insisting on any one way of entrance into the kingdom we seem to narrow God's mercy, or sadden true hearts, or make the method of approach a test of the fact of entrance. God's city has more than twelve gates; they open to all the thirty-two

Digitized by Google

points of the compass, yet there is, in the religious experience of the truest saints, always something analogous to this change. And what I desire to press upon you is, that unless you are only religious people after the popular superficial fashion of the day, there will be something like it in your lives.

There will be a change in a man's deepest self, so that he will be a 'new creature,' with new tastes, new motives stirring to action, new desires pressing for satisfaction, new loves sweetly filling his heart, new insight into the meanings and true good of life and time guiding his conduct, new aversions withdrawing him from old delights which have become hateful now, new hopes pluming their growing wings, and new powers bearing him along a new road. There will be a change in his relations to God and to God's will. God in Christ will have become his centre, instead of self, which was so before. He lives in a new world, being himself a new man.

Our Lord uses this very illustration when He says, 'He that heareth My Word, and believeth Him that sent Me, hath eternal life, and cometh not into judgment, but hath passed out of death into life.' That is a great migration, is it not, from the condition of a corpse to that of a living man? Paul, too, gives the same idea with a somewhat different turn of the illustration, when he gives 'thanks to the Father who delivered us out of the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of,'—not, as we might expect to complete the antithesis, 'the light,' but—the 'kingdom of the Son of His love,' which is the same thing as the light. The illustration is probably drawn from the practice of the ancient conquering monarchs, who, when they subjugated a country, were wont to lead

Digitized by Google

away captive long files of its inhabitants as compulsory colonists, and set them down in another land. Thus the conquering Christ comes, and those whom He conquers by His love, He shifts by a great emigration out of the dominion of that darkness which is at once tyranny and anarchy, and leads them into the happy kingdom of the light.

Thus, then, all Christian men become such, because they turn their backs upon their old selves, and 'crucify their affections and lusts'; and paste down the leaf, as it were, on which their blotted past is writ, and turn over a new and a fairer one. And my question to you, dear brethren, is, Are you 'men from the other side,' who were not born where you live now, and who have passed out of the native Chaldea into the foreign—and yet to the new self home—land of union with God?

2. This designation may be taken as teaching that a Christian should be known as a foreigner, a man from across the water.

Everybody in Canaan that knew Abram at all knew him as not one of themselves. The Hebrew was the name he went by, because his unlikeness to the others was the most conspicuous thing about him, even to the shallowest eye. Abram found himself, when he had migrated into Canaan, in no barbarous country, but plunged at once into the midst of an organised and compact civilisation, that walled its cities, and had the comforts and conveniences and regularities of a settled order; and in the midst of it all, what did he do? He elected to live in a tent. 'He dwelt in tabernacles,' as the Epistle to the Hebrews comments upon his history, 'because he looked for a city.' The more his expectations were fixed upon a

Digitized by Google

permanent abode, the more transitory did he make his abode here. If there had been no other city to fill his eyes, he would have gone and lived in some of those that were in the land. If there had been no other order to which he felt himself to belong, he would have had no objection to cast in his lot with the order and the people with whom he lived on friendly terms. But although he bought and sold with them, and fought for them and by their sides, and acquired from them land in which to bury his dead, he was not one of them, but said, 'No! I am not going into your city. I stay in my tent under this terebinth tree; for I am here as a stranger and a sojourner.' No doubt there were differences of language, dress, and a hundred other little things which helped the impression made on the men of the land by this strange visitor who lived in amity but in separation, and they are all crystallised in the name which the popular voice gave him, 'The man from the other side.'

That is the impression which Christian people ought to make in the world. They should be recognised, by even unobservant eyes who know nothing of the inner secret of their lives, as plainly belonging to another order. If we seek to keep fresh in our own minds the consciousness that we do so, it will make itself manifest in all our bearing and actions. So that exhortation to cultivate the continual sense that our true city—the mother city of our hearts and hopes—is in heaven, is ever to be reiterated, and as constantly obeyed, as the necessary condition of a life worthy of our true affinities and of our glorious hopes.

Nor less needful is the other exhortation—live by the laws of your own land, not by those of the foreign country where you are for a time. If you do that

Digitized by Google

thoroughly, you will not need to say, 'I am from another country.' Your conduct will say it for you. An English ship is a bit of England, in whatever latitude it may be, and however far beyond the three-mile limit of the King's authority upon the seas it may float. And so, wherever there is a Christian man, there is a bit of God's kingdom, and over that little speck in the midst of the ocean of the world the flag with the Cross on it should fly, and the laws of the Christ should be the only laws that have currency. If it could be said of us as Haman said to his king about the Jews, that we were a people with laws 'diverse from those of all people,' we should be doing more than, alas! most of us do, to honour Him whom we profess to serve. Follow Christ, and people will be quick enough to say of you 'The man from the other side,' 'He does not belong to our city.' There is no need for ostentation, nor for saying, 'Come and see my zeal for the Lord,' nor for blowing trumpets before us at street corners or elsewhere. The less of all that the better. The more we try to do the common things done by the folk round us, but from another motive, the more powerful will be our witness for our Master.

For instance, when John Knox was in the French galleys, he was fastened to the same oar with some criminal, perhaps a murderer. The two men sat on the same bench, did the same work, tugged at the same heavy sweep, were fed with the same food, suffered the same sorrows. Do you think there was any doubt as to the infinite gulf between them? We may be working side by side, at the very same tasks, and under similar circumstances, with men that have no share in our faith, and no sympathy with our hopes and aspirations, and yet, though doing the same thing, it will *not*

Digitized by Google

be the same thing. And if we keep Christ before us, and follow His steps who has left us an example, depend upon it people will very soon find out that we are men 'from across the water.'

Notice, further, how this dissimilarity and obvious aloofness from the order of things in which we dwell is still perfectly compatible with all sorts of helpful associations. The context shows us that. There had come a flood of invasion, under kings with strange and barbarous names, from the far East. They had swept down upon the fertile valley of Siddim, and there had inflicted devastation. Amongst the captives had been Lot, Abram's relative, and all his goods had been taken. One fugitive, as it appears, had escaped, and the first thing he did was to go straight to 'the man from the other side,' and tell him about it, as if sure of sympathy and help. No doubt the relationship between Abram and Lot was the main reason why the panting survivor made his way to the hills where Abram's tent was pitched, but there was also confidence in his willingness to help the Sodomites who had lost their goods. So it was not to the sons of Heth in Mamre that the fugitive turned in his extremity, but he 'told Abram the Hebrew.'

I need not narrate over again the familiar story of how, for once in his peaceful life, the 'friend of God' girds on his sword and develops military instincts in his prompt and well-planned pursuit, which show that if he did not try to conquer some part of the land which he knew to be his by the will of God, it was not for want of ability, but because he 'believed God,' and could wait. We all know how he armed his slaves, and made a swift march to the northern extremity of the land, and then, by a nocturnal surprise, came down upon the

Digitized by Google

marauders and scattered them like chaff, before his onset, and recovered Lot and all the spoil.

Let us learn that, if Christian men will live well apart from the world, they will be able to sympathise with and help the world; and that our religion should fit us for the prompt and heroic undertaking, as it certainly does for the successful accomplishment, of all deeds of brotherly kindness and sympathy, bringing help and solace to the weak and the wearied, liberty to the captives, and hope to the despairing.

I do not believe that Christian men have any business to draw swords now. Abram is in that respect the Old Testament type of a God-fearing hero, with the actual sword in his hands. The New Testament type of a Christian warrior without a sword is not one jot less, but more, heroic. The form of sympathy, help, and 'public spirit' which the 'man from the other side' displayed is worse than an anachronism now in the light of Christ's law. It is a contradiction. But the spirit which breathed through Abram's conduct should be ours. We are bound to 'seek the peace of the city' where we dwell as strangers and pilgrims, avoiding no duty of sympathy and help, but by prompt, heroic, self-forgetting service to all the needy, sorrowful, and oppressed, building up such characters for ourselves that fugitives and desperate men shall instinctively turn to men from the other side for that help which, they know full well, the men of the country are too selfish or cowardly to give.

May I venture to suggest yet another and very different application of this name? To the aboriginal inhabitants of heaven, the angels that kept their first estate, redeemed men are possessors of a unique experience; and are the 'men from the other side.' They

Digitized by Google

who entered on their pilgrimage through the Red Sea of conversion, pass out of it through the Jordan of death. They who become Christ's, by the great change of yielding their hearts to Him, and who live here as pilgrims and sojourners, pass dryshod through the stream into His presence. And there they who have always dwelt in the sunny highlands of the true Canaan, gather round them, and call them, not unenvying, perhaps, their experience, 'The men that have crossed.' The 'Hebrews of the Hebrews' in the heavens are those who have known what it is to be pilgrims and sojourners, and to whom the promise has been fulfilled in the last hour of their journey, 'When thou passest through the river, I will be with thee.' *They* teach the angels a new song who sing, 'Thou hast led us through fire and through water, and brought us into a wealthy place.'

GOD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAM

'And He brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and He said unto him, So shall thy seed be. And he believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness. And He said unto him, I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it. And he said, Lord God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it? And He said unto him, Take me an heifer of three years old, and a she goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon. And he took unto him all these, and divided them in the midst, and laid each piece one against another: but the birds divided he not. And when the fowls came down upon the carcases, Abram drove them away. And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him. And he said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not their's, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance. And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full. And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces. In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates.'—GENESIS xv. 5-18.

1. ABRAM had exposed himself to dangerous reprisals by his victory over the confederate Eastern raiders.

Digitized by Google

In the reaction following the excitement of battle, dread and despondency seem to have shadowed his soul. Therefore the assurance with which this chapter opens came to him. It was new, and came in a new form. He is cast into a state of spiritual ecstasy, and a mighty 'word' sounds, audible to his inward ear. The form which it takes—'I am thy shield'—suggests the thought that God shapes His revelation according to the moment's need. The unwarlike Abram might well dread the return of the marauders in force, to avenge their defeat. Therefore God speaks to his fears and present want. Just as to Jacob the angels appeared as a heavenly camp guarding his undefended tents and helpless women; so, here and always, God is to us what we most need at the moment, whether it be comfort, or wisdom, or guidance, or strength. The manna tasted to each man, as the rabbis say, what he most desired. God's gifts take the shape of man's necessity.

Abram had just exercised singular generosity in absolutely refusing to enrich himself from the spoil. God reveals Himself as 'his exceeding great reward.' He gives Himself as recompense for all sacrifices. Whatever is given up at His bidding, 'the Lord is able to give thee much more than this.' Not outward things, nor even an outward heaven, is the guerdon of the soul; but a larger possession of Him who alone fills the heart, and fills the heart alone. Other riches may be counted, but this is 'exceeding great,' passing comprehension, and ever unexhausted, and having something over after all experience. Both these aspects of God's preciousness are true for earth; but we need a shield only while exposed to attack. In the land of peace, He is only our reward.

Digitized by Google

2. Mark the triumphant faith which springs to meet the divine promise. The first effect of that great assurance is to deepen Abram's consciousness of the strange contradiction to it apparently given by his childlessness. It is not distrust that answers the promise with a question, but it is eagerness to accept the assurance and ingenuous utterance of difficulties in the hope of their removal. God is too wise a father not to know the difference between the tones of confidence and unbelief, however alike they may sound; and He is too patient to be angry if we cannot take in all His promise at once. He breaks it into bits not too large for our lips, as He does here. The frequent reiterations of the same promises in Abram's life are not vain. They are a specimen of the unwearied repetition of our lessons, 'Here a little, there a little,' which our teacher gives His slow scholars. So, once more, Abram gets the promise of posterity in still more glorious form. Before, it was likened to the dust of the earth; now it is as the innumerable stars shining in the clear Eastern heaven. As he gazes up into the solemn depths, the immensity and peace of the steadfast sky seems to help him to rise above the narrow limits and changefulness of earth, and a great trust floods his soul. Abram had lived by faith ever since he left Haran; but the historian, usually so silent about the thoughts of his characters, breaks through his usual manner of narrative to insert the all-important words which mark an epoch in revelation, and are, in some aspects, the most significant in the Old Testament. Abram 'believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness.'

Observe the teaching as to the nature and object of faith in that first clause. The word rendered

Digitized by Google

'believed' literally means to steady oneself by leaning on something. So it gives in a vivid picture more instructive than many a long treatise what faith is, and what it does for us. As a man leans his trembling hand on a staff, so we lay our weak and changeful selves on God's strength; and as the most mutable thing is steadied by being fastened to a fixed point, so we, though in ourselves light as thistledown, may be steadfast as rock, if we are bound to the rock of ages by the living band of faith. The metaphor makes it plain that faith cannot be merely an intellectual act of assent, but must include a moral act, that of confidence. Belief as credence is mainly an affair of the head, but belief as trust is an act of the will and the affections.

The object of faith is set in sunlight clearness by these words,—the first in which Scripture speaks of faith. Abram leaned on 'the Lord.' It was not the promise, but the promiser, that was truly the object of Abram's trust. He believed the former, because he trusted Him who made it. Many confusions in Christian teaching would have been avoided if it had been always seen that faith grasps a person, not a doctrine, and that even when the person is revealed by doctrine, it is him, and not only it, which faith lays hold of. Whether God speaks promises, teachings of truth, or commandments, faith accepts them, because it trusts Him. Christ is revealed to us for our faith by the doctrinal statements of the New Testament. But we must grasp Himself, as so revealed, if we are to have faith which saves the soul. This same thought of the true object of faith as personal helps us to understand the substantial identity of faith in all ages and stages of revelation,

Digitized by Google

however different the substance of the creeds. Abram knew very little of God, as compared with our knowledge. But it was the same God whom Abram trusted, and whom we trust as made known in His Son. Hence we can stretch out our hands across the ages, and clasp his as partaker of 'like precious faith.' We walk in the light of the same sun,—he in its morning beams, we in its noonday glory. There has never been but one road to God, and that is the road which Abram trod, when 'he believed in the Lord.'

3. Mark the full-orbed gospel truth as to the righteousness of faith which is embedded in this record of early revelation, 'He counted it to him for righteousness.' A geologist would be astonished if he came on remains in some of the primary strata which indicated the existence, in these remote epochs, of species supposed to be of much more recent date. So here we are startled at finding the peculiarly New Testament teaching away back in this dim distance. No wonder that Paul fastened on this verse, which so remarkably breaks the flow of the narrative, as proof that his great principle of justification by faith was really the one only law by which, in all ages, men had found acceptance with God. Long before law or circumcision, faith had been counted for righteousness. The whole Mosaic system was a parenthesis; and even in it, whoever had been accepted had been so because of his trust, not because of his works. The whole of the subsequent divine dealings with Israel rested on this act of faith, and on the relation to God into which, through it, Abram entered. He was not a perfectly righteous man, as some passages of his life show; but he rose here to the height of loving and yearning trust in God, and God took that trust in

Digitized by Google

lieu of perfect conformity to His will. He treated and regarded him as righteous, as is proved by the covenant which follows. The gospel takes up this principle, gives us a fuller revelation, presents the perfect righteousness of Christ as capable of becoming ours by faith, and so unveils the ground on which Abram and the latest generations are equally 'accepted in the beloved.' This reckoning of righteousness to the unrighteous, on condition of their faith, is not because of any merit in faith. It does not come about in reward of, but by means of, their faith, which is nothing in itself, but is the channel only of the blessing. Nor is it a mere arbitrary act of God's, or an unreal imputing of what is not. But faith unites with Christ; and 'he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit,' so as that 'in Him we have redemption.' His righteousness becomes ours. Faith grafts us into the living Vine, and we are no longer regarded in our poor sinful individual personality, but as members of Christ. Faith builds us into the rock; but He is a living Stone, and we are living stones, and the life of the foundation rises up through all the courses of the great temple. Faith unites sinful men to God in Christ; therefore it makes them partakers of the 'blessedness of the man, . . . to whom the Lord will not impute sin,' and of the blessedness of the man to whom the Lord reckons his faith for righteousness. That same faith which thus clothes us with the white robe of Christ's righteousness, in lieu of our own tattered raiment, also is the condition of our becoming righteous by the actual working out in our character of all things lovely and of good report. It opens the heart to the entrance of that divine Christ, who is first made *for* us, and then, by daily appropriation of

Digitized by Google

the law of the spirit of life, is made *in* us, 'righteousness and sanctification, and redemption.' May all who read these lines 'be found in Him,' having 'that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith!'

4. Consider the covenant which is the consequence of Abram's faith, and the proof of his acceptance.

It is important to observe that the whole remainder of this chapter is regarded by the writer as the result of Abram's believing God. The way in which verse 7 and the rest are bolted on, as it were, to verse 6, clearly shows this. The nearer lesson from this fact is, that all the Old Testament revelation from this point onward rests on the foundation of faith. The further lesson, for all times, is that faith is ever rewarded by more intimate and loving manifestations of God's friendship, and by fuller disclosure of His purposes. The covenant is not only God's binding Himself anew by solemn acts to fulfil His promises already made, but it is His entering into far sweeter and nearer alliance with Abram than even He had hitherto had. That name, 'the friend of God,' by which he is still known over all the Mohammedan world, contains the very essence of the covenant. In old days men were wont to conclude a bond of closest amity by cutting their flesh and interchanging the flowing blood. Henceforth they had, as it were, one life. We have not here the shedding of Abram's blood, as in the covenant of circumcision. Still, the slain animals represent the parties to the covenant, and the notion of a resulting unity of the closest order as between God and Abram is the very heart of the whole incident.

The particulars as to the rite by which the covenant

Digitized by Google

was established are profoundly illuminative. The significant division of the animals into two shows that they were regarded as representing the contracting parties, and the passing between them symbolised the taking up of the obligations of the covenant. This strange rite, which was widely spread, derives importance from the use of it probably made in Hebrews ix. 16, 17. The new covenant, bringing still closer friendship and higher blessings, is sealed by the blood of Christ. He represents both God and man. In His death, may we not say that the manhood and the Godhead are parted, and we, standing as it were between them, encompassed by that awful sacrifice, and enclosed in its mysterious depths, enter into covenant with God, and become His friends?

We need not to dwell upon the detailed promises, of which the covenant was the seal. They are simply the fuller expansion of those already made, but now confirmed by more solemn guarantees. The new relation of familiar friendship, established by the covenant itself, is the main thing. It was fitting that God's friend should be in the secret of His purposes. 'The servant knoweth not what his lord doeth,' but the friend does. And so we have here the assurance that faith will pierce to the discernment of much of the mind of God, which is hid from sense and the wisdom of this world. If we would know, we must believe. We may be 'men of God's counsel,' and see deeply into the realities of the present, and far ahead into what will then become the certainties of the future, if only we live by faith in the secret place of the Most High, and, like John, lean so close on the Master's bosom that we can hear His lowest whisper.

Notice, too, the lessons of the smoking furnace and

Digitized by Google

the blazing torch. They are like the pillar of fire and cloud. Darkness and light; a heart of fire and a wrapping of darkness,—these are not symbols of Israel and its checkered fate, as Dean Stanley thinks, but of the divine presence: they proclaim the double aspect of all divine manifestations, the double element in the divine nature. He can never be completely known; He is never completely hid. Ever does the lamp flame; ever around it the smoke wreathes. In all His self-revelation is 'the hiding of His power'; after all revelation He dwelleth 'in the thick darkness.' Only the smoke is itself fire, but not illumined to our vision. The darkness is light inaccessible. Much that was 'smoke' to Abram has caught fire, and is 'light' to us. But these two elements will ever remain; and throughout eternity God will be unknown, and yet well known, pouring Himself in ever-growing radiance on our eyes, and yet 'the King invisible.'

Nor is this all the teaching of the symbol. It speaks of that twofold aspect of the divine nature, by which to hearts that love He is gladsome light, and to unloving ones He is threatening darkness. As to the Israelites the pillar was light, and to the Egyptians darkness and terror; so the same God is joy to some, and dread to others. 'What maketh heaven, that maketh hell.' Light itself can become the source of pain the most exquisite, if the eye is diseased. God Himself cannot but be a torment to men who love darkness rather than light. Love and wrath, life and death, a God who pities and who cannot but judge, are solemnly proclaimed by that ancient symbol, and are plainly declared to us in the perfect revelation in Christ Jesus.

Digitized by Google

Observe, too, the manner of the ratification of the covenant. The symbol of the Divine presence passed between the pieces. No mention is made of Abram's doing so. Why this one-sided covenant? Because God's gracious dealings with men are one-sided. He seeks no oaths from us; He does not exchange blessings for our gifts. His covenant is the free result of His unmotived love, and is ratified by a solemn sacrifice, which we do not offer. We have nothing to do but to take what He gives. All ideas of barter and bargain are far from Him. Our part is but to embrace His covenant, which is complete and ratified whether we embrace it or not. What a wonderful thought that is of a covenant-making and a covenant-keeping God! We do not hear so much of it as our fathers did. The more is the pity. It means that God has, as it were, buoyed out across the boundless ocean of His possible modes of action a plain course, which He binds Himself to keep; that He has frankly let us into the very secret of His doings; that He has stooped to use human forms of assurance to make it easier to trust Him; that He has confirmed His promise by a mighty sacrifice. Therefore we may enter into closest friendship with Him, and take for our own the exultant swan-song of Abram's royal son: 'Although my house be not so with God [although my life be stained, and my righteousness unfit to be offered to His pure eyes]; yet He hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure: for this is all my salvation, and all my desire.'

Digitized by Google

THE WORD THAT SCATTERS FEAR

'Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.
GENESIS XV. 1.

I

ABRAM was now apparently about eighty-five years old. He had been fourteen years in Palestine, and had, for the only time in his life, quite recently been driven to have recourse to arms against a formidable league of northern kings, whom, after a swift forced march from the extreme south to the extreme north of the land, he had defeated. He might well fear attack from their overwhelmingly superior forces. So this vision, like all God's words, fits closely to moments' needs, but is also for all time and all men.

1. The call to conquer fear.

Fear not.—(*a*) There is abundant reason for fear in facts of life. There are so many certain evils, and so many possible evils, that any man who is not a feather-brained fool must sometimes quail.

(*b*) Reasons for fear in our relations to divine law.

(*c*) The only rational way of conquering fears is by showing them to be unfounded. It is waste of breath to say, Don't be afraid, and to do nothing to remove the occasions of fear. It is childish to try to get rid of fears by shutting the eyes tight and refusing to look formidable facts in the face.

(*d*) The revelation of God is the true antidote to fear.

(*e*) 'Fear not' is the characteristic word of divine revelation. It is of frequent occurrence from Abraham till John in Patmos.

2. The ground of the call in the Revelation of God as Shield.

Digitized by Google

(*a*) As to outward evils, His protection assures us, not of absolute exemption, but of His entire control of them, so that men and circumstances are His instruments, and His will only is powerful. Chedorlaomer and all the allied kings are nothing; 'a noise,' as the prophet said of a later conqueror. All the bitterness and terror is taken out of evil. If any fiery dart pass through the shield, all its poison is wiped off in passage. So there remains no reason for fear, since all things work together for good. Behind that shield we are safe as diver in his bell, though seas rave and sea-monsters swim around.

(*b*) As to inward evils, our Shield assures us of absolute exemption. 'Shield of faith.' Faith is shield because it takes hold of God's strength.

3. The ground of the call in the Revelation of God as Reward. Abraham had refused all share in booty, a large sacrifice, and here he is promised, A Reward in God, *i.e.* He gives Himself in recompense for all sacrifices in path of duty. 'The Lord is able to give thee much more than these.' This promise opens out to general truth that God Himself is the true reward of a devout life. There are many recompenses for all sacrifices for God, some of them outward and material, some of them inward and spiritual, but the reward which surpasses all others is that by such sacrifices we attain to greater capacity for God, and therefore possess more of Him. This is the only Reward worth thinking of—God only satisfies the soul. With Him we are rich; without Him poor; 'exceeding great'—'riches in glory,' transcending all measure. The revelations of God as Shield and Reward are both given in reference to the present life, but the former applies only to earth, where 'without are fighters, within are fears'; while

Digitized by Google

the latter is mainly true for heaven, where those who have fought, having God for their Shield, will possess Him for their Reward, in a measure and manner which will make all earthly experiences seem poor. Here the 'heirs of God' get subsistence money, which is a small instalment of their inheritance; there they enter into possession of it all.

II

MANY years have passed since Abram was called to go forth from his father's house, assured that God would make of him a great nation. They had been years of growing power. He has been dwelling at Mamre, as a prince among the people of the land, a power. There sweeps down on Southern Palestine the earliest of those invasions from the vast plains of the North which afterwards for generations were the standing dread of Abram's descendants. Like the storm pillars in their own deserts, are these wild marauders with the wild names that never appear again in the history. Down on the rich valleys and peaceful pasture lands they swoop for booty, not for conquest. Like some sea-bird, they snatch their prey and away. They carry with them among the long train of captives Abram's ungenerous brother-in-law, Lot. Then the friend of God, the father of the faithful, musters his men, like an Arab sheikh as he was, and swiftly follows the track of the marauders over the hills of Samaria, and across the plain of Jezreel. The night falls, and down he swoops upon them and scatters them. Coming back he had interviews with the King of Sodom, when he refuses to take any of the spoil, and with Melchizedek.

Digitized by Google

Abram is back at Mamre. How natural that fear and depression should seize him: the reaction from high excitement; the dread that from the swarming East vengeance would come for his success in that night surprise; the thought that if it did, he was a wandering stranger in a strange land and could not count on allies. Then there would come, perhaps, the remembrance of how long God had delayed the very beginnings of the fulfilment, 'Seeing I go childless.'

To this mood of mind the divine vision is addressed. 'Fear not—I am thy shield' whatever force comes against thee, 'and thine exceeding great reward,'—perhaps in reference to his refusal to take anything from the spoil. But God says this to us all. In these antique words the very loftiest and purest principles of spiritual religion are set forth.

He that loves and trusts God possesses God.

He that possesses God has enough for earth.

He that possesses God has enough for heaven.

1. It is possible for a man to have God for his. 'I am thy Reward,'—not merely Rewarder, but Reward.

How can one spiritual Being belong to another?—plainly, By mutual love.

The Gospel assures us of God's love, and makes it possible for ours to be fixed on Him.

Faith gives us God for ours.

The highest view of the blessings of the Gospel is that God Himself becomes our reward.

How sad the insanity of men appears, in the ordinary aims of their life, its rewards and its objects of desire! How they chase after variety!

How much loftier and truer a conception of the blessing of religion this is than notions of mere escape and the like!

Digitized by Google

2. The possession of God is enough for earth.

God the all-sufficient object for our spirits, His love, the communication of Himself, the sense of His presence, the depths of His infinite character, of His wondrous ways, of His revealed Truth as an object for thought: of His authoritative will as imperative for will and conscience: aspiration towards Him.

God the Eternal Object.

To find Him in everything, and everything in Him, is to be at rest.

This is what He promises—

Not a life of outward success and ease—much nobler than if He did.

Take Abram's as a type.

In war He will be our Defence.

In absence of other joys He will be Enough.

Sphered and included in Him is all sweetness. He sustains all relations, and does for us what these other joys and goods partially do.

The possession of His love should put away all fear, since having Him we are not at the mercy of externals.

What, then, is Life as men ordinarily make it?—what a blunder!

3. To possess God is enough for heaven.

Such a relationship is the great proof of immortality.

Christ and Sadducees.

The true glory of heaven is in fuller possession of God: no doubt other things, but these subsidiary.

The Reward is God.

The idea of recompense ample and full for all sorrow.

More than adequate wages for all work.

That final reward will show how wise the wanderer

Digitized by Google

was, who left his father's house and 'looked for a city.' God is not ashamed to be called their God.

Christ comes to us—offers Himself.

Think of how rich with Him, and oh, think of how poor without Him!

Which will you have on earth?

Which will you have in another world?

FAITH AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

'And he believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness.'
GENESIS xv. 6.

IT is remarkable to find this anticipation of New Testament teaching so far back. It is like finding one full-blown flower in a garden where all else is but swelling into bud. No wonder that Paul fastened on it to prove that justification by faith was older than Moses, than law or circumcision, that his teaching was the real original, and that faith lay at the foundation of the Old Testament religion.

1. The Nature of Faith.—The metaphor in the Hebrew word is that of a man leaning all his weight on some strong stay. Surely that metaphor says more than many definitions. It teaches that the essence of faith is absolute reliance, and that unites us with Him on whom we rely. Its result will be steadfastness. We are weak, mobile, apt to be driven hither and thither, but light things lashed to fixed things become fixed. So 'reeds shaken with wind' are changed into iron pillars.

2. The Object of Faith.—'Lord.' It is a Person, not the promise but the Promiser. Of course, reliance on the Person results in acceptance of His word, and here

Digitized by Google

it is God's word as to the future. Our faith has to do with the future, but also with the past. Its object is Christ, the historic Christ, the living Christ, the Christ who will come again. How clear the nature of faith becomes when its object is clear! It cannot be mere assent, but trust. How clear becomes its identity in all ages! The creeds may be different in completeness, but the object of faith is the same, and the emotion is the same.

3. The effect of Faith.—Righteous is conformity to the will of God. Abram was not righteous, but he yielded himself to God and trusted Him, and God accepted that as the equivalent of righteousness. The acceptance was shown by the Covenant, and by the fulfilment of the promises.

So here is the great truth that faith is accepted for righteous. It is rightly regarded and treated as righteous, by the estimate of God, who estimates things as they really are. It *is* righteousness, for—

(*a*) Faith is itself a supreme act of righteousness, as being accordant with God's supreme desire for man.

(*b*) Faith unites with Christ the righteous.

(*c*) Faith will blossom out into all righteousness.

WAITING FAITH REWARDED AND STRENGTHENED BY NEW REVELATIONS

'And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before Me, and be thou perfect. And I will make My covenant between Me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying, As for Me, behold, My covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee. And I will establish My covenant between Me and thee and thy seed after

Digitized by Google

thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God. And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep My covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations.'

GENESIS xvii. 1-9.

ABRAM was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. He was ninety-nine when God appeared to him, as recorded in this chapter. There had been three divine communications in these twenty-five years—one at Bethel on entering the land, one after the hiving off of Lot, and one after the battle with the Eastern kings. The last-named vision had taken place before Ishmael's birth, and therefore more than thirteen years prior to the date of the lesson.

We are apt to think of Abraham's life as being crowded with supernatural revelations. We forget the foreshortening necessary in so brief a sketch of so long a career, which brings distant points close together. Revelations were really but thinly sown in Abram's life. For something over thirteen years he had been left to walk by faith, and, no doubt, had felt the pressure of things seen, silently pushing the unseen out of his life.

Especially would this be the case as Ishmael grew up, and his father's heart began to cling to him. The promise was beginning to grow dimmer, as years passed without the birth of the promised heir. As verse 18 of this chapter shows, Abram's thoughts were turning to Ishmael as a possible substitute. His wavering confidence was steadied and quickened by this new revelation. We, too, are often tempted to think that, in the highest matters, 'a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush,' and to wish that God would be content with our Ishmaels, which satisfy us, and would not withdraw us from possessed good, to

Digitized by Google

make us live by hope of good unseen. We need to reflect on this vision when we are thus tempted.

1. Note the revelation of God's character, and of our consequent duty, which preceded the repetition of the covenant. 'I am the Almighty God.' The aspect of the divine nature, made prominent in each revelation of Himself, stands in close connection with the circumstances or mental state of the recipient. So when God appeared to Abram after the slaughter of the kings, He revealed Himself as 'thy Shield,' with reference to the danger of renewed attack from the formidable powers which He had bearded and beaten. In the present case the stress is laid on God's omnipotence, which points to doubts whispering in Abram's heart, by reason of God's delay in fulfilling His word, and of his own advancing years and failing strength. Paul brings out the meaning of the revelation when he glorifies the faith which it kindled anew in Abram, 'being fully assured that, what He had promised, He was able also to perform' (Rom. iv. 21). Whenever our 'faith has fallen asleep,' and we are ready to let go our hold of God's ideal and settle down on the low levels of the actual, or to be somewhat ashamed of our aspirations after what seems so slow of realisation, or to elevate prudent calculations of probability above the daring enthusiasms of Christian hope, the ancient word, that breathed itself into Abram's hushed heart, should speak new vigour into ours. 'I am the Almighty God—take My power into all thy calculations, and reckon certainties with it for the chief factor. The one impossibility is that any word of Mine should fail. The one imprudence is to doubt My word.'

What follows in regard to our duty from that

Digitized by Google

revelation? 'Walk before Me, and be thou perfect.' Enoch walked *with* God; that is, his whole active life was passed in communion with Him. The idea conveyed by 'walking *before* God' is not precisely the same. It is rather that of an active life, spent in continual consciousness of being 'naked and opened before the eyes of Him to whom we have to give account.' That thrilling consciousness will not paralyse nor terrify, if we feel that we are not only 'ever in the great Task-Master's eye,' but that God's omniscience is all-knowing love, and is brought closer to our hearts and clothed in gracious tenderness in Christ whose 'eyes were as a flame of fire,' but whose love is more ardent still, who knows us altogether, and pities and loves as perfectly as He knows.

What sort of life will spring from the double realisation of God's almightiness, and of our being ever before Him? 'Be thou perfect.' Nothing short of immaculate conformity with His will can satisfy His gaze. His desire for us should be our aim and desire for ourselves. The standard of aspiration and effort cannot be lowered to meet weakness. This is nobility of life—to aim at the unattainable, and to be ever approximating towards our aim. It is more blessed to be smitten with the longing to win the unwon than to stagnate in ignoble contentment with partial attainments. Better to climb, with faces turned upwards to the inaccessible peak, than to lie at ease in the fat valleys! It is the salt of life to have our aims set fixedly towards ideal perfection, and to say, 'I count not myself to have apprehended: but . . . I press toward the mark.' *Toward* that mark is better than *to* any lower. Our moral perfection is, as it were, the reflection in humanity of the divine almightiness.

Digitized by Google

The wide landscape may be mirrored in an inch of glass. Infinity may be, in some manner, presented in miniature in finite natures. Our power cannot represent God's omnipotence, but our moral perfection may, especially since that omnipotence is pledged to make us perfect if we will walk before Him.

2. Note the sign of the renewed covenant. Compliance with these injunctions is clearly laid down as the human condition of the divine fulfilment of it. 'Be thou perfect' comes first; 'My covenant is with thee' follows. There was contingency recognised from the beginning. If Israel broke the covenant, God was not unfaithful if He should not adhere to it. But the present point is that a new confirmation is given before the terms are repeated. The main purpose, then, of this revelation, did not lie in that repetition, but in the seal given to Abram by the change of name.

Another sign was also given, which had a wider reference. The change of name was God's seal to His part. Circumcision was the seal of the other party, by which Abram, his family, and afterwards the nation, took on themselves the obligations of the compact.

The name bestowed is taken to mean 'Father of a Multitude.' It was the condensation into a word, of the divine promise. What a trial of Abram's faith it was to bid him take a name which would sound in men's ears liker irony than promise! He, close on a hundred years old, with but one child, who was known not to be the heir, to be called the father of many! How often Canaanites and his own household would smile as they used it! What a piece of senile presumption it would seem to them! How often

Digitized by Google

Abram himself would be tempted to think his new name a farce rather than a sign! But he took it humbly from God, and he wore it, whether it brought ridicule from others or assurance in his own heart. It takes some courage for any of us to call ourselves by names which rest on God's promise and seem to have little vindication in present facts. The world is fond of laughing at 'saints,' but Christians should familiarise themselves with the lofty designations which God gives His children, and see in them not only a summons to life corresponding, but a pledge and prophecy of the final possession of all which these imply. God calls 'things that are not, as though they were'; and it is wisdom, faith, and humility—not presumption—which accepts the names as omens of what shall one day be.

The substance of the covenant is mainly identical with previous revelations. The land is to belong to Abram's seed. That seed is to be very numerous. But there is new emphasis placed on God's relation to Abram's descendants. God promises to be 'a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee,' and, again, 'I will be their God' (verses 7, 8). That article of the old covenant is repeated in the new (Jer. xxxi. 33), with the addition, 'And they shall be My people,' which is really involved in it. We do not read later more spiritual ideas into the words, when we find in them here, at the very beginning of Hebrew monotheism, an insight into the deep truth of the reciprocal possession of God by us, and of us by God. What a glimpse into the depths of that divine heart is given, when we see that we are His possession, precious to Him above all the riches of earth and the magnificences of heaven! What a lesson as to the inmost

Digitized by Google

blessedness of religion, when we learn that it takes God for its very own, and is rich in possessing Him, whatever else may be owned or lacking!

To possess God is only possible on condition of yielding ourselves to Him. When we give ourselves up, in heart, mind, and will, to be His, He is ours. When we cease to be our own, we get God for ours. The self-centred man is poor; he neither owns himself nor anything besides, in any deep sense. When we lose ourselves in God, we find ourselves, and being content to have nothing, and not even to be our own masters or owners, we possess ourselves more truly than ever, and have God for our portion, and in Him 'all things are ours.'

A PETULANT WISH

'And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before Thee!'
GENESIS xvii. 18.

THESE words sound very devout, and they have often been used by Christian parents yearning for the best interests of their children, and sometimes of their wayward and prodigal children. But consecrated as they are by that usage, I am afraid that their meaning, as they were uttered, was nothing so devout and good as that which is often attached to them.

1. Note the temper in which Abraham speaks here. The very existence of Ishmael was a memorial of Abraham's failure in faith and patience. For he thought that the promised heir was long in coming, and so he thought that he would help God. For thirteen years the child had been living beside him, winding a son's way into a father's heart, with much

Digitized by Google

in his character, as was afterwards seen, that would make a frank, daring boy his old father's darling. Then all at once comes the divine message, 'This is not the son of the Covenant; this is not the heir of the Promise. Sarah shall have a child, and from him shall come the blessings that have been foretold.' And what does Abraham do? Fall down in thankfulness before God? leap up in heart at the conviction that now at last the long-looked-for fulfilment of the oath of God was impending? Not he. 'O that *Ishmael* might live before Thee. Why cannot *he* do? Why may he not be the chosen child, the heir of the Promise? Take him, O God!'

That is to say, he thinks he knows better than God. He is petulant, he resists his blessing, he fancies that his own plan is quite as good as the divine plan. He does not want to draw away his heart from the child that it has twined round. So he loses the blessing of the revelation that is being made to him; because he does not bow his will, and accept God's way instead of his own. Now, do you not think that that is what we do? When God sends us Isaac, do we not often say, 'Take Ishmael; he is my own making. I have set all my hopes on him. Why should I have to wrench them all away?' In our individual lives we want to prescribe to God, far too often, not only the *ends*, but the *way* in which we shall get to the ends; and we think to ourselves, 'That road of my own engineering that I have got all staked out, that is the true way for God's providence to take.' And when His path does not coincide with ours, then we are discontented, and instead of submitting we go with our pet schemes to Him; and if not in so many words, at least in spirit and temper, we try to force our way upon God, and

Digitized by Google

when He is speaking about Isaac insist on pressing Ishmael on His notice.

It is often so in regard to our individual lives; and it is so in regard to the united action of Christian people very often. A great deal of what calls itself earnest contending for 'the faith once delivered to the saints' is nothing more nor less than insisting that methods of men's devising shall be continued, when God seems to be substituting for them methods of His own sending; and so fighting about externals and church polity, and determining that the world has got to be saved in my own special fashion, and in no other, though God Himself seems to be suggesting the new thing to me. That is a very frequent phenomenon in the experience of Christian communities and churches. Ishmael is so very dear. He is not the child of promise, but he is the child that we have thought it advisable to help God with. It is hard for us to part with him.

Dear brethren, sometimes, too, God comes to us in various providences, and not only reduces into chaos and a heap of confusion our nicely built-up little houses, but He sometimes comes to us, and lifts us out of some lower kind of good, which is perfectly satisfactory to us, or all but perfectly satisfactory, in order to give to us something nobler and higher. And we resist that too; and do not see why Ishmael should not serve God's turn as he has served ours; or think that there is no need at all for Isaac to come into our lives. God never takes away from us a lower, unless for the purpose of bestowing upon us a higher blessing. Therefore not to submit is the foolishest thing that men can do.

But if that be anything like an account of the temper expressed by this saying, is it not strange

Digitized by Google

that murmuring against God takes the shape of praying? Ah! there is a great deal of 'prayer,' as it calls itself, which is just moulded upon this petulant word of Abraham's momentarily failing faith and submission. How many people think that to pray means to bring their wishes to God, and try to coax Him to make them His wishes! Why, half the shallow sceptical talk of this generation about the worthlessness of prayer goes upon that fundamental fallacy that the notion of prayer is to dictate terms to God; and that unless a man gets his wishes answered he has no right to suppose that his prayers are answered. But it is not so. Prayer is not after the type of 'O that Ishmael might live before Thee!' That is a poor kind of prayer of which the inmost spirit is resistance to a clear dictate of the divine will; but the true prayer is, 'O that I may be willing to take what Thou art willing, in Thy mercy and love, to send!'

I believe in importunate prayer, but I believe also that a great deal of what calls itself importunate prayer is nothing more than an obstinate determination not to be satisfied with what satisfies God. If a man has been bringing his wishes—and he cannot but have such—continuously to God, with regard to any outward things, and these have not been answered, he needs to look very carefully into his own temper and heart in order to make sure that what seems to be waiting upon God in importunate petition is not pestering Him with refused desires. To make a prayer out of my rebellion against His will is surely the greatest abuse of prayer that can be conceived. And when Abraham said, 'O that Ishmael might live before Thee!' if he said it in the spirit in

Digitized by Google

which I think he did, he was not praying, but he was grumbling.

2. And then notice, still further, how such a temper and such a prayer have the effect of hiding joy and blessing from us.

This was the crisis of Abraham's whole life. It was the moment at which his hundred years nearly of patient waiting were about to be rewarded. The message which he had just received was the most lovely and gracious word that ever had come to him from the heavens, although many such words had come. And what does he do with it? Instead of falling down before God, and letting his whole heart go out in jubilant gratitude, he has nothing to say but 'I would rather that Thou didst it in another way. It is all very well to speak about sending this heir of promise. I have no pleasure in that, because it means that my Ishmael is to be passed by and shelved.' So the proffered joy is turned to ashes, and Abraham gets no good, for the moment, out of God's greatest blessing to him; but all the sky is darkened by mists that come up from his own heart.

Brethren, if you want to be miserable, perk up your own will against God's. If you want to be blessed, acquiesce in all that He does send, in all that He has sent, and, by anticipation, in all that He will send. For, depend upon it, the secret of finding sunbeams in everything is simply letting God have His own way, and making your will the sounding-board and echo of His. If Abraham had done as he ought to have done, that would have been the gladdest moment of his life. You and I can make out of our deepest sorrows the occasions of pure, though it is quiet, gladness, if only we have learned to say, 'Not my will, but Thy will be

Digitized by Google

done.' That is the talisman that turns everything into gold, and makes sorrow forget its nature, and almost approximate to solemn joy.

3. My last word is this: God loves us all too well to listen to such a prayer.

Abraham's passionate cry was so much empty wind, and was like a straw laid across the course of an express train, in so far as its power to modify the gracious purpose of God already declared was concerned. And would it not be a miserable thing if we could deflect the solemn, loving march of the divine Providence by these hot, foolish, purblind wishes of ours, that see only the nearer end of things, and have no notion of where their further end may go, or what it may be?

Is it not better that we should fall back upon this thought, though, at first sight, it seems so to limit the power of petition, 'We know that if we ask anything according to His will He heareth us'? There is nothing that would more wreck our lives than if what some people want were to be the case—that God should let us have our own way, and give us serpents because we asked for them and fancied they were eggs; or let us break our teeth upon bestowed stones because, like whimpering children crying for the moon, we had asked for them under the delusion that they were bread.

Leave all that in His hands; and be sure of this, that the true way to peace, to rest, to gladness, and to wringing the last drop of possible sweetness out of gifts and losses, disappointments and fruitions, is to have no will but God's will enthroned above and in our own wills. If Abraham had acquiesced and submitted, Ishmael and Isaac would have been a pair

Digitized by Google

to bless his life, as they stood together over his grave. And if you and I will leave God to order all our ways, and not try to interfere with His purposes by our short-sighted dictation, 'all things will work together for good to us, because we love God,' and lovingly accept His will and His law.

'BECAUSE OF HIS IMPORTUNITY'

'And the men rose up from thence, and looked toward Sodom: and Abraham went with them to bring them on the way. And the Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do; Seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which He hath spoken of him. And the Lord said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous; I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto Me; and if not, I will know. And the men turned their faces from thence, and went toward Sodom: but Abraham stood yet before the Lord. And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt Thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city: wilt Thou also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that are therein? That be far from Thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from Thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? And the Lord said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes. And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes: Peradventure there shall lack five of the fifty righteous: wilt Thou destroy all the city for lack of five? And He said, If I find there forty and five, I will not destroy it. And he spake unto Him yet again, and said, Peradventure there shall be forty found there. And He said, I will not do it for forty's sake. And he said unto Him, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak: Peradventure there shall thirty be found there. And He said, I will not do it, if I find thirty there. And he said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord: Peradventure there shall be twenty found there. And He said, I will not destroy it for twenty's sake. And he said, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak yet but this once: Peradventure ten shall be found there. And He said, I will not destroy it for ten's sake. And the Lord went His way, as soon as He had left communing with Abraham: and Abraham returned unto his place.'—GENESIS xviii. 16-33.

I

THE first verse of this chapter says that 'the Lord appeared' unto Abraham, and then proceeds to tell that 'three men stood over against him,' thus indicating that these were, collectively, the manifestation

Digitized by Google

of Jehovah. Two of the three subsequently 'went toward Sodom,' and are called 'angels' in chapter xix. 1. One remained with Abraham, and is addressed by him as 'Lord,' but the three are similarly addressed in verse 3. The inference is that Jehovah appeared, not only in the one 'man' who spake with Abraham, but also in the two who went to Sodom.

In this incident we have, first, God's communication of His purpose to Abraham. He was called the friend of God, and friends confide in each other. 'The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him,' and it is ever true that they who live in amity and communion with God thereby acquire insight into His purposes. Even in regard to public or so-called 'political' events, a man who believes in God and His moral government will often be endowed with a 'terrible sagacity,' which forecasts consequences more surely than do godless politicians. In regard to one's own history, it is still more evidently true that the one way to apprehend God's purposes in it is to keep in close friendship with Him. Then we shall see the meaning of the else bewildering whirl of events, and be able to say, 'He that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God.' But the reason assigned for intrusting Abraham with the knowledge of God's purpose is to be noted. It was because of his place as the medium of blessing to the nations, and as the lawgiver to his descendants. God had 'known him,'—that is, had lovingly brought him into close relations with Himself, not for his own sake only, but, much more, that he might be a channel of grace to Israel and the world. His 'commandment' to his descendants was to lead to their worship of Jehovah and their upright living, and these again to their possession of the

Digitized by Google

blessings promised to Abraham. That purpose would be aided by the knowledge of the judgment on Sodom, its source, and its cause, and therefore Abraham was admitted into the council-chamber of Jehovah. The insight given to God's friends is given that they may more fully benefit men by leading them into paths of righteousness, on which alone they can be met by God's blessings.

The strongly figurative representation in verses 20, 21, according to which Jehovah goes down to ascertain whether the facts of Sodom's sin correspond to the report of it, belongs to the early stage of revelation, and need not surprise us, but should impress on us the gradual character of the divine Revelation, which would have been useless unless it had been accommodated to the mental and spiritual stature of its recipients. Nor should it hide from us the lofty conception of God's long-suffering justice, which is presented in so childlike a form. He does 'not judge after . . . the hearing of His ears,' nor smite without full knowledge of the sin. A later stage of revelation puts the same thought in language less strange to us, when it teaches that 'the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by Him actions are weighed,' and in His balances many a false estimate, both of virtuous and vicious acts, is corrected, and retribution is always exactly adjusted to the deed.

But the main importance of the incident is in the wonderful picture of Abraham's intercession, which, in like manner, veils, under a strangely sensuous representation, lofty truths for all ages. It is to be noted that the divine purpose expressed in 'I will go down now, and see,' is fulfilled in the going of the two (men or angels) towards Sodom; therefore

Digitized by Google

Jehovah was in them. But He was also in the One before whom Abraham stood. The first great truth enshrined in this part of the story is that the friend of God is compassionate even of the sinful and degraded. Abraham did not intercede for Lot, but for the sinners in Sodom. He had perilled his life in warfare for them; he now pleads with God for them. Where had he learned this brave pity? Where but from the God with whom he lived by faith? How much more surely will real communion with Jesus lead *us* to look on all men, and especially on the vicious and outcast, with His eyes who saw the multitudes as sheep without a shepherd, torn, panting, scattered, and lying exhausted and defenceless! Indifference to the miseries and impending dangers of Christless men is impossible for any whom He calls 'not servants, but friends.'

Again, we are taught the boldness of pleading which is permitted to the friend of God, and is compatible with deepest reverence. Abraham is keenly conscious of his audacity, and yet, though he knows himself to be but dust and ashes, that does not stifle his petitions. His was the holy 'importunity' which Jesus sent forth for our imitation. The word so rendered in Luke xi. 8, which is found in the New Testament there only, literally means 'shamelessness,' and is exactly the disposition which Abraham showed here. Not only was he persistent, but he increased his expectations with each partial granting of his prayer. The more God gives, the more does the true suppliant expect and crave; and rightly so, for the gift to be given is infinite, and each degree of possession enlarges capacity so as to fit to receive more, and widens desire. What contented us to-day should not content us to-morrow.

Digitized by Google

Again, Abraham is bold in appealing to a law to which God is bound to conform. 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' is often quoted with an application foreign to its true meaning. Abraham was not preaching to men trust that the most perplexing acts of God would be capable of full vindication if we knew all, but he was pleading with God that His acts should be plainly accordant with the idea of justice planted by Him in us. The phrase is often used to strengthen the struggling faith that

> 'All is right which seems most wrong,
> If it be His sweet will.'

But it means not 'Such and such a thing must be right because God has done it,' but 'Such and such a thing is right, therefore God must do it.' Of course, our conceptions of right are not the absolute measure of the divine acts, and the very fact which Abraham thought contrary to justice is continually exemplified in Providence, that 'the righteous should be as the wicked' in regard to earthly calamities affecting communities. So far Abraham was wrong, but the spirit of his remonstrance was wholly right.

Again, we learn the precious lesson that prayer for others is a real power, and does bring down blessings and avert evils. Abraham did not here pray for Lot, but yet 'God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow' (chap. xix. 29), so that there had been unrecorded intercession for him too. The unselfish desires for others, that exhale from human hearts under the influence of the love which Christ plants in us, do come down in blessings on others, as the moisture drawn up by the sun may descend in fructifying rain on far-off pastures of the

Digitized by Google

wilderness. We help one another when we pray for one another.

The last lesson taught is that 'righteous' men are indeed the 'salt of the earth,' not only preserving cities and nations from further corruption, but procuring for them further existence and probation. God holds back His judgments so long as hope of amendment survives, and 'will not destroy for the ten's sake.'

THE INTERCOURSE OF GOD AND HIS FRIEND

II

We have seen that the fruit of Abraham's faith was God's entrance into close covenant relations with him; or, as James puts it, 'It was reckoned unto him for righteousness; and he was called the friend of God.' This incident shows us the intercourse of the divine and human friends in its familiarity, mutual confidence, and power. It is a forecast of Christ's own profound teachings in His parting words in the upper chamber, concerning the sweet and wondrous intercourse between the believing soul and the indwelling God.

1. The friend of God catches a gleam of divine pity and tenderness. Abraham has no relations with the men of Sodom. Their evil ways would repel him; and he would be a stranger among them still more than among the Canaanites, whose iniquity was 'not yet full.' But though he has no special bonds with them, he cannot but melt with tender compassion when he hears their doom. Communion with the very Source of all gentle love has softened his heart, and he yearns

Digitized by Google

over the wicked and fated city. Where else than from his heavenly Friend could he have learned this sympathy? It wells up in this chapter like some sudden spring among solemn solitudes—the first instance of that divine charity which is the best sign that we have been with God, and have learned of Him. All that the New Testament teaches of love to God, as necessarily issuing in love to man, and of the true love to man as overleaping all narrow bounds of kindred, country, race, and ignoring all questions of character, and gushing forth in fullest energy towards the sinners in danger of just punishment, is here in germ. The friend of God must be the friend of men; and if they be wicked, and he sees the frightful doom which they do not see, these make his pity the deeper. Abraham does not contest the justice of the doom. He lives too near his friend not to know that sin must mean death. The effect of friendship with God is not to make men wish that there were no judgments for evil-doers, but to touch their hearts with pity, and to stir them to intercession and to effort for their deliverance.

2. The friend of God has absolute trust in the rectitude of His acts. Abraham's remonstrance, if we may call it so, embodies some thoughts about the government of God in the world which should be pondered.

His first abrupt question, flung out without any reverential preface, assumes that the character of God requires that the fate of the righteous should be distinguished from that of the wicked. The very brusqueness of the question shows that he supposed himself to be appealing to an elementary and indubitable law of God's dealings. The teachings of the Fall and of the Flood had graven deep on his conscience the truth that

Digitized by Google

the same loving Friend must needs deal out rewards to the good and chastisement to the bad. That was the simple faith of an early time, when problems like those which tortured the writers of the seventy-third Psalm, or of Job and Ecclesiastes, had not yet disturbed the childlike trust of the friend of God, because no facts in his experience had forced them on him. But the belief which was axiomatic to him, and true for his supernaturally shaped life with its special miracles and visible divine guard, is not the ultimate and irrefragable principle which he thought it. In widespread calamities the righteous are blended with the wicked in one bloody ruin; and it is the very misery of such judgments that often the sufferers are not the wrongdoers, but that the fathers eat the sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. The whirlwind of temporal judgments makes no distinctions between the dwellings of the righteous and the wicked, but levels them both. No doubt, the fact that the impending destruction was to be a direct Divine interposition of a punitive kind made it more necessary that it should be confined to the actual culprits. No doubt, too, Abraham's zeal for the honour of God's government was right. But his first plea belongs to the stage of revelation at which he stood, not to that of the New Testament, which teaches that the eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell were not sinners above all men in Jerusalem. Abraham's confidence in God's justice, not Abraham's conceptions of what that justice required, is to be imitated. A friend of God will hold fast by the faith that 'His way is perfect,' and will cherish it even in the presence of facts more perplexing than any which met Abraham's eyes.

Another assumption in his prayer is that the

Digitized by Google

righteous are sources of blessing and shields for the wicked. Has he there laid hold of a true principle? Certainly, it is indeed the law that 'every man shall bear his own burden,' but that law is modified by the operation of this other, of which God's providence is full. Many a drop of blessing trickles from the wet fleece to the dry ground. Many a stroke of judgment is carried off harmlessly by the lightning conductor. Where God's friends are inextricably mixed up with evil-doers, it is not rare to see diffused blessings which are destined indeed primarily for the former, but find their way to the latter. Christians are the 'salt of the earth' in this sense too, that they save corrupt communities from swift destruction, and for their sakes the angels delay their blow. In the final resort, each soul must reap its own harvest from its own deeds; but the individualism of Christianity is not isolation. We are bound together in mysterious community, and a good man is a fountain of far-flowing good. The truest 'saviours of society' are the servants of God.

A third principle is embodied in the solemn question, 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' This is not meant in its bearing here, as we so often hear it quoted, to silence man's questionings as to mysterious divine acts, or to warn us from applying our measures of right and wrong to these. The very opposite thought is conveyed; namely, the confidence that what God does must approve itself as just to men. He is Judge of all the earth, and therefore bound by His very nature, as by His relations to men, to do nothing that cannot be pointed to as inflexibly right. If Abraham had meant, 'What God does, must needs be right, therefore crush down all questions of how it accords with thy sense of justice,' he would have been

Digitized by Google

condemning his own prayer as presumptuous, and the thought would have been entirely out of place. But the appeal to God to vindicate His own character by doing what shall be in manifest accord with His name, is bold language indeed, but not too bold, because it is prompted by absolute confidence in Him. God's punishments must be obviously righteous to have moral effect, or to be worthy of Him.

But true as the principle is, it needs to be guarded. Abraham himself is an instance that men's conceptions of right do not completely correspond to the reality. His notion of 'right' was, in some particulars, as his life shows, imperfect, rudimentary, and far beneath New Testament ideas. Conscience needs education. The best men's conceptions of what befits divine justice are relative, progressive; and a shifting standard is no standard. It becomes us to be very cautious before we say to God, 'This is the way. Walk Thou in it,' or dismiss any doctrine as untrue on the ground of its contradicting our instincts of justice.

3. The friend of God has power with God. 'Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do?' The divine Friend recognises the obligation of confidence. True friendship is frank, and cannot bear to hide its purposes. That one sentence in its bold attribution of a like feeling to God leads us deep into the Divine heart, and the sweet reality of his amity. Insight into His will ever belongs to those who live near Him. It is the beginning of the long series of disclosures of 'the secret of the Lord' to 'them that fear Him,' which is crowned by 'henceforth I call you not servants; but . . . friends; for all things that I have heard of My Father I have made known unto you.' So much for the divine side of the communion.

Digitized by Google

On the human side, we are here taught the great truth, that God's friends are intercessors, whose voice has a mysterious but most real power with God. If it be true, that, in general terms, the righteous are shields and sources of blessing to the unholy, it is still more distinctly true that they have access to God's secret place with petitions for others as well as for themselves. The desires which go up to God, like the vapours exhaled to heaven, fall in refreshing rain on spots far away from that whence they rose. In these days we need to keep fast hold of our belief in the efficacy of prayer for others and for ourselves. God knows Himself and the laws of His government a great deal better than any one besides does; and He has abundantly shown us in His Word, and by many experiences, that breath spent in intercession is not wasted. In these old times, when worship was mainly sacrificial, this wonderful instance of pure intercession meets us, an anticipation of later times. And from thence onwards there has never failed proof to those who will look for it, that God's friends are true priests, and help their brethren by their prayers. Our voices should 'rise like a fountain night and day' for men. But there is a secret distrust of the power, and a flagrantly plain neglect of the duty, of intercession nowadays, which need sorely the lesson that God 'remembered Abraham' and delivered Lot. Luther, in his rough, strong way, says: 'If I have a Christian who prays to God for me, I will be of good courage, and be afraid of nothing. If I have one who prays against me, I had rather have the Grand Turk for my enemy.'

The tone of Abraham's intercession may teach us how familiar the intercourse with the Heavenly Friend may

Digitized by Google

be. The boldest words from a loving heart, jealous of God's honour, are not irreverent in His eyes. This prayer is abrupt, almost rough. It sounds like remonstrance quite as much as prayer. Abraham appeals to God to take care of His name and honour, as if he had said, If Thou doest this, what will the world say of Thee, but that Thou art unmerciful? But the grand confidence in God's character, the eager desire that it should be vindicated before the world, the dread that the least film should veil the silvery whiteness or the golden lustre of His name, the sensitiveness for His honour—these are the effects of communion with Him; and for these God accepts the bold prayer as truer reverence than is found in many more guarded and lowly sounding words. Many conventional proprieties of worship may be broken just because the worship is real. 'The frequent sputter shows that the soul's depths boil in earnest.' We may learn, too, that the most loving familiarity never forgets the fathomless gulf between God and it. Abraham remembers that he is 'dust and ashes'; he knows that he is venturing much in speaking to God. His pertinacious prayers have a recurring burden of lowly recognition of his place. Twice he heralds them with 'I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord'; twice with 'Oh let not the Lord be angry.' Perfect love casts out fear and deepens reverence. We may come with free hearts, from which every weight of trembling and every cloud of doubt has been lifted. But the less the dread, the lower we shall bow before the Loftiness which we love. We do not pray aright until we tell God everything. The 'boldness' which we as Christians ought to have, means literally a frank speaking out of all that is in our hearts. Such 'boldness and access

Digitized by Google

with confidence' will often make short work of so-called seemly reverence, but it will never transgress by so much as a hair's-breadth the limits of lowly, trustful love.

Abraham's persistency may teach us a lesson. If one might so say, he hangs on God's skirt like a burr. Each petition granted only encourages him to another. Six times he pleads, and God waits till he has done before He goes away; He cannot leave His friend till that friend has said all his say. What a contrast the fiery fervour and unwearying pertinacity of Abraham's prayers make to the stiff formalism of the intercessions one is familiar with! The former are like the successive pulses of a volcano driving a hot lava stream before it; the latter, like the slow flow of a glacier, cold and sluggish. Is any part of our public or private worship more hopelessly formal than our prayers for others? This picture from the old world may well shame our languid petitions, and stir us up to a holy boldness and persistence in prayer. Our Saviour Himself teaches that 'men ought always to pray, and not to faint,' and Himself recommends to us a holy importunity, which He teaches us to believe is, in mysterious fashion, a power with God. He gives room for such patient continuance in prayer by sometimes delaying the apparent answer, not because He needs to be won over to bless, but because it is good for us to draw near, and to keep near, the Lord. He is ever at the door, ready to open, and if sometimes, like Rhoda to Peter, He does not open immediately, and we have to keep knocking, it is that our desires may increase by delay, and so He may be able to give a blessing, which will be the greater and sweeter for the tarrying.

Digitized by Google

So the friendship is manifested on both sides: on God's, by disclosure of His purpose and compliance with His friend's request; on Abraham's, by speech which is saved from irreverence by love, and by prayer which is acceptable to God by its very importunity. Jesus Christ has promised us the highest form of such friendship, when He has said, 'I have called you friends: for all things that I have heard of My Father I have made known unto you'; and again, 'If ye abide in Me, . . . ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.'

THE SWIFT DESTROYER

'And when the morning arose, then the angels hastened Lot, saying, Arise, take thy wife, and thy two daughters, which are here; lest thou be consumed in the iniquity of the city. And while he lingered, the men laid hold upon his hand, and upon the hand of his wife, and upon the hand of his two daughters; the Lord being merciful unto him: and they brought him forth, and set him without the city. And it came to pass, when they had brought them forth abroad, that He said, Escape for thy life; look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the plain; escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed. And Lot said unto them, Oh, not so, my Lord: Behold now, Thy servant hath found grace in Thy sight, and Thou hast magnified Thy mercy, which Thou hast shewed unto me in saving my life; and I cannot escape to the mountain, lest some evil take me, and I die: Behold now, this city is near to flee unto, and it is a little one: Oh, let me escape thither, (is it not a little one?) and my soul shall live. And He said unto him, See, I have accepted thee concerning this thing also, that I will not overthrow this city, for the which thou hast spoken. Haste thee, escape thither; for I cannot do any thing till thou be come thither. Therefore the name of the city was called Zoar. The sun was risen upon the earth when Lot entered into Zoar. Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven; And He overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground. But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt.'—GENESIS xix. 15-26.

THE religious significance of this solemn page of revelation is but little affected by any of the interesting questions which criticism raises concerning it, so that I am free to look at the whole narrative for the purpose of deducing its perennial lessons.

Digitized by Google

There are four clearly marked stages in the story: the lingering of Lot in the doomed city, and the friendly force which dragged him from it; the prayer of abject fear, and the wonderful answer; the awful catastrophe; and the fate of the wretched woman who looked back.

1. Lot's lingering and rescue by force. Second thoughts are not always best. When great resolves have to be made, and when a clear divine command has to be obeyed, the first thought is usually the nobler; and the second, which pulls it back, and damps its ardour, is usually of the earth, earthy. So was it with Lot. Overnight, in the excitement of the terrible scene enacted before his door, Lot had been not only resolved himself to flee, but his voice had urged his sons-in-law to escape from the doom which he then felt to be imminent. But with the cold grey light of morning his mood has changed. The ties which held him in Sodom reassert their power. Perhaps daylight made his fears seem less real. There was no sign in the chill Eastern twilight that this day was to be unlike the other days. Perhaps the angels' summons roused him from sleep, and their 'arise' is literally meant. It might have given wings to his flight. Urgent, and resonant, like the morning bugle, it bids him be stirring lest he be swept away 'in the punishment of the city.' Observe that the same word means 'sin' and 'punishment,'—a testimony to the profound truth that at bottom they are one, sin being pain in the root, pain being sin in the flower. So our own word 'evil' covers all the ground, and means both sin and sorrow. But even that pealing note does not shatter his hesitation. He still lingers. What kept him? That which had first taken him there—

Digitized by Google

material advantages. He had struck root in Sodom. The tent life which he had kept to at first has been long given up; we find him sitting in the gate of the city, the place for gossip and friendly intercourse. He has either formed, or is going to form, marriage alliances for his daughters with men of the city who are as black as the rest. Perhaps his wife, whom the story will not name, for pity or for horror, was a Sodomite. To escape meant to leave all this and his wealth behind. If he goes out, he goes out a pauper. So his heart, which is where his treasure is, makes his movements slow. What insanity his lingering must have seemed to the angels! I wonder if we, who cling so desperately to the world, and who are so slow to go where God would have us to be for our own safety, if thereby we shall lose anything of this world's wealth, seem very much wiser to eyes made clear-sighted with the wisdom of heaven. This poor hesitating lingerer, too much at home in the city of destruction to get out of it even to save his life, has plenty of brothers to-day. Every man who lets the world hold him by the skirts when Christ is calling him to salvation, and every man who is reluctant to obey any clear call to sacrifice and separation from godless men, may see his own face in this glass, and perhaps get a glimpse of its ugliness.

What a homely picture, full of weighty truth, the story gives us, of the angels each taking two of the reluctant four by the hand, and dragging them with some degree of kindly force from destruction into safety! So, in a great fire, domestic animals and horses seem to find a strange fascination in the flames, and have to be carried out of certain death by main force. They 'set him'—or we might read,

Digitized by Google

'made him rest'—outside the city. It was but a little distance, for these 'cities' were tiny places, and the walls were soon reached. But it was far enough to change Lot's whole feelings. He passes to feeble despair and abject fear, as we shall see. That forlorn group, homeless, friendless, stripped of everything, shivering outside the gate in the cold morning air, may teach us how wise and prudent the man is who seeks the kingdom of God second, and the other things first.

2. There was a pause outside the city. A new voice speaks now to Lot. 'They' brought him forth; but 'He' said 'escape.' The same 'Lord' to whom Abraham had prayed, has now rejoined the mysterious pair whom He had sent to Sodom. And Lot's entreaty is addressed to Him whom he calls 'my Lord.' He uses singular pronouns throughout, although the narrator says that he 'said unto *them*.' There seems to be here the same idea as is embodied in the word 'Elohim'; namely, that the divine powers are regarded as in some sense separable, and yet all inhering in a personal unity. At all events, we have here a distinct representation of an intercourse between God and man, in which thoughts are conveyed to the human spirit direct from the divine, and desires pass from the human to the divine. The manner of the intercourse we do not know, but the possibility of the fact can scarcely be denied by any believer in a God; and, however we may call this miraculous or abnormal, the essence of the event can be repeated in the experience of each of us. God still speaks to men, and men may still plead with God. Unless our religion is communion, it is nothing.

The divine voice reiterates the angels' urgent

Digitized by Google

command in still more stringent words: 'Escape for thy life.' There is to be no more angel-leading, but Lot's feet are to be made as hinds' feet by the thought of the flaming death that is pursuing. His lingering looks are sternly forbidden, since they would delay his flight and divide his heart. The direction of his flight is for the first time pointed out. The fertile plain, which had lured him down from the safe hills, is prohibited. Only on the mountain-side, probably the eastern mountains, where the morning red was beginning to blush, is there safety.

Lot's answer shows a complete change of feeling. He is too fully alarmed now. His fright is so desperate that it has killed faith and common sense. The natural conclusion from God's mercy, which he acknowledges, would have been trust and obedience. 'Therefore I can escape,' not 'but I cannot escape,' would have been the logic of faith. The latter is the irrationality of fear. When a man who has been cleaving to this fleeting life of earthly good wakes up to believe his danger, he is ever apt to plunge into an abyss of terror, in which God's commands seem impossible, and His will to save becomes dim. The world first lies to us by 'You are quite safe where you are. Don't be in a hurry to go.' Then it lies, 'You never can get away now.' Reverse Lot's whimpering fears, and we get the truth. Are not God's directions how to escape, promises that we shall escape? Will He begin to build, and not be able to finish? Will the judgments of His hand overrun their commission, like a blood-hound which, in its master's absence, may rend his friend? 'We have all of us one human heart,' and this swift leap from unreasoning carelessness to as unreasoning dread, this failure to draw the true

Digitized by Google

conclusion from God's past mercy, and this despairing recoil from the path pointed for us, and craving for easier ways, belongs to us. 'A strange servant of God was this,' say we. Yes, and we are often quite as strange. How many people awakened to see their danger are so absorbed by the sight that they cannot see the cross, or think they can never reach it!

God answered the cry, whatever its fault, and that may well make us pause in our condemnation. He hears even a very imperfect petition, and can see the tiniest germ of faith buried under thick clods of doubt and fear. This stooping readiness to meet Lot's weakness comes in wonderful contrast with the terrible revelation of judgment which follows. What a conception of God, which had room for this more than human patience with weakness, and also for the flashing, lurid glories of destructive retribution! Zoar is spared, not for the unworthy reason which Lot suggested—because its minuteness might buy impunity, as some noxious insect too small to be worth crushing—but in accordance with the principle which was illustrated in Abraham's intercession, and even in Lot's safety; namely, that the righteous are shields for others, as Paul had the lives of all that sailed with him given to him.

God's 'cannot' answers Lot's 'cannot.' His power is limited by His own solemn purpose to save His faltering servant. The latter had feared that, before he could reach the mountain, 'the evil' would overtake him. God shows him that his safety was a condition precedent to its outburst. Lot barred the way. God could not 'let slip the dogs of' judgment, but held them in the leash until Lot was in Zoar. Very awful is the command to make haste, based on this impossi-

Digitized by Google

bility, as if God were weary of delay, and more than ready to smite. However we may find anthropomorphism in these early narratives, let us not forget that, when the world has long been groaning under some giant evil, and the bitter seed is grown up into a waving forest of poison, there is something in the passionless righteousness of God which brooks no longer delay, but seeks to make 'a short work' on the earth.

3. So we are brought face to face with the grim story of the destruction. There is a world of tragic meaning in the simple note of time given. 'The sun was risen upon the earth when Lot entered into Zoar.' The low-lying cities of the plain would lie in shadow for some time before the sun topped the eastern hills. What a dawn! At that joyous hour, just when the sunshine struck down on the smiling plain, and lake and river gleamed like silver, and all things woke to new hopes and fresh life, then the sky darkened, and the earth sank, and horrible rain of fiery bitumen fell from the black pall, salt mud poured in streams, and over all hung a column of fat, oily smoke. It is not my province to discuss the physical cause of the destruction; but I may refer to the suggestions of Sir J. W. Dawson, in his *Egypt and Syria*, and in *The Expositor* for May 1886, in which he shows that great beds of bituminous limestone extend below the Jordan valley and much of the Dead Sea, and that the escape of inflammable gas from these through the opening of a fissure along a great 'line of fault,' is capable of producing all the effects described. The 'brimstone' of the Authorised Version is probably rather some form of bituminous matter which would be carried into the air by such

Digitized by Google

an escape of gas, and a thick saline mud would accompany the eruption, encrusting anything it reached. Subsidence would follow the ejection of quantities of such matter; and hence the word 'overthrew,' which seems inappropriate to a mere conflagration, would be explained.

But, however this may be, we have to recognise a supernatural element in the starting of the train of natural causes, as well as in the timing of the catastrophe, and a divine purpose of retribution, which turns the catastrophe, however effected, into a judgment.

So regarded, the event has a double meaning. In the first place, it is a revelation of an element in the divine character and of a feature in the divine government. To the men of that time, it might be a warning. To Abraham, and through him to his descendants, and through them to us, it preaches a truth very unwelcome to many in this day: that there is in God that which constrains Him to hate, fight against, and punish, evil. The temper of this generation turns away from such thoughts, and, in the name of the truth that 'God is love,' would fain obliterate the truth that He does and will punish. But if the punitive element be suppressed, and that in God which makes it necessary ignored or weakened, the result will be a God who has not force enough to love, but only weakly to indulge. If He does not hate and punish, He does not pardon. For the sake of the love of God, we must hold firm by the belief in the judgments of God. The God who destroyed Sodom is not merely the God of an earlier antiquated creed. 'Is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also of the Gentiles? Yea, of the Gentiles also.'

Digitized by Google

Again, this event is a prophecy. So our Lord has employed it; and much of the imagery in which the last judgment is represented is directly drawn from this narrative. So far from this story showing to us only the superstitions of a form of belief which we have long outgrown, its deepest meaning lies far ahead, and closes the history of man on the earth. We know from the lips which cannot lie, that the appalling suddenness of that destruction foreshadows the swiftness of the coming of that last 'day of the Lord.' We know that in literality some of the physical features shall be reproduced; for the fire which shall burn up the world and all its works is no figure, nor is it proclaimed only by such non-authoritative voices as those of Jesus and His apostles, but also by the modern possessors of infallible certitude, the men of science. We know that that day shall be a day of retribution. We know, too, that the crime of Sodom, foul and unnatural as it was, is not the darkest, but that its inhabitants (who have to face that judgment too) will find their doom more tolerable, and their sins lighter, than some who have had high places in the Church, than the Pharisees and wise men who have not taken Christ for their Saviour.

4. The fate of the loiterer. Her backward look must have been more than momentary, for the destruction of the cities did not begin till Lot was safe in Zoar. She must have lingered far behind, and been overtaken by the eruption of liquid saline mud, which, as Sir J. W. Dawson has shown, would attend or follow the outburst of bituminous matter, so that her fate was the natural consequence of her heart being still in Sodom. As to the 'pillar of salt,' which has excited cavils on the one hand and foolish legends

Digitized by Google

on the other, probably we are to think rather of a heap than of a pillar. The word does not occur in either meaning elsewhere, but its derivation implies something raised above the level of the ground; and a heap, such as would be formed by a human body encrusted with salt mud, would suit the requirements of the expression. Like a man who falls in a snow-storm, or, still more accurately, just as some of the victims at Pompeii stumbled in their flight, and were buried under the ashes, which still keep the outline of their figures, so Lot's wife was covered with the half-liquid slimy mud. Granted the delay in her flight, the rest is perfectly simple and natural. She was buried in a horrible tomb; and, in pity to her memory, no name has been written upon it. She remains to all generations, in a far truer sense than superstition dreamed of when it pointed to an upright salt rock as her prison and her monument, a warning of the danger of the backward look, which betrays the true home of the heart, and may leave us unsheltered in the open plain when the fiery storm bursts. 'Remember Lot's wife.'

When the angels awoke Lot, the day was breaking. By the time that Abraham had risen 'early in the morning,' and reached the place by his tent from which he had yesterday looked on the smiling plain, all was over, and the heavy smoke cloud wrapped the dead with its pall-like folds. So swift and sudden is to be the coming of the Son of man,—as the lightning which rushes in one fierce blinding flash from one side of heaven to the other. Wherefore, God calls to each of us: 'Escape for thy life; look not behind thee.'

Digitized by Google

FAITH TESTED AND CROWNED

'And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And He said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him. Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. And Abraham said unto his young men, 'Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you. And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together. And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Abraham said, My son, God will provide Himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together. And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. And He said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from Me. And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son. And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah-jireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the Lord it shall be seen.'—GENESIS xxii. 1-14.

I

A LIFE of faith and self-denial has usually its sharpest trials at or near its beginning. A stormy day has generally a calm close. But Abraham's sorest discipline came all sudden, like a bolt from blue sky. Near the end, and after many years of peaceful, uneventful life, he had to take a yet higher degree in the school of faith. Sharp trial means increased possession of God. So his last terrible experience turned to his crowning mercy.

1. The very first words of this solemn narrative raise many questions. We have God appointing the awful trial. The Revised Version properly re-

Digitized by Google

places 'tempt' by 'prove.' The former word conveys the idea of appealing to the worse part of a man, with the wish that he may yield and do the wrong. The latter means an appeal to the better part of a man, with the desire that he should stand. Temptation says: 'Do this pleasant thing; do not be hindered by the fact that it is wrong.' Trial, or proving, says: 'Do this right and noble thing; do not be hindered by the fact that it is painful.' The one is 'a sweet, beguiling melody,' breathing soft indulgence and relaxation over the soul; the other is a pealing trumpet-call to high achievements.

God's proving does not mean that He stands by, watching how His child will behave. He helps us to sustain the trial to which He subjects us. Life is all probation; and because it is so, it is all the field for the divine aid. The motive of His proving men is that they may be strengthened. He puts us into His gymnasium to improve our physique. If we stand the trial, our faith is increased; if we fall, we learn self-distrust and closer clinging to Him. No objection can be raised to the representation of this passage as to God's proving Abraham, which does not equally apply to the whole structure of life as a place of probation that it may be a place of blessing. But the manner of the trial here presents a difficulty. How could God command a father to kill his son? Is that in accordance with His character? Well, two considerations deserve attention. First, the final issue; namely, Isaac's deliverance, was an integral part of the divine purpose from the beginning of the trial; so that the question really is, Was it accordant with the divine character to require readiness to sacrifice even a son at His command? Second, that in Abraham's time, a father's

Digitized by Google

right over his child's life was unquestioned, and that therefore this command, though it lacerated Abraham's heart, did not wound his conscience as it would do were it heard to-day. It is impossible to conceive of a divine injunction such as this being addressed to us. We have learned the inalienable sacredness of every life, and the awful prerogative and burden of individuality. God's command cannot enforce sin. But it was not wrong in Abraham's eyes for a father to slay his son; and God might shape His message to the form of the existing morality without derogation from His character, especially when the result of the message would be, among other things, to teach His abhorrence of human sacrifices, and so to lift the existing morality to a higher level.

2. The great body of the history sets before us Abraham standing the terrible test. What unsurpassable beauty is in the simple story! It is remarkable, even among the scriptural narratives, for the entire absence of anything but the visible facts. There is not a syllable about the feelings of father or of son. The silence is more pathetic than many words. We look as into a magic crystal, and see the very event before our eyes, and our own imaginations tell us more of the world of struggle and sorrow raging under that calm outside than the highest art could do. The pathos of reticence was never more perfectly illustrated. Observe, too, the minute, prolonged details of the slow progress to the dread instant of sacrifice. Each step is told in precisely the same manner, and the series of short clauses, coupled together by an artless 'and,' are like the single strokes of a passing bell, or the slow drops of blood heard falling from a fatal wound. The homely pre-

Digitized by Google

parations for the journey are made by Abraham himself. He makes no confidante of Sarah; only God and himself knew what that bundle of wood meant. What thoughts must have torn his soul throughout these weary days! How hard to keep his voice round and full while he spoke to Isaac! How much the long protracted tension of the march increased the sharpness of the test! It is easier to reach the height of obedient self-sacrifice in some moment of enthusiasm, than to keep up there through the commonplace details of slowly passing days. Many a faith, which could even have slain its dearest, would have broken down long before the last step of that sad journey was taken.

The elements of the trial were two: first, Abraham's soul was torn asunder by the conflict of fatherly love and obedience to God. The narrative intimates this struggle by continually insisting on the relationship between the two. The command dwells with emphasis on it: 'thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest.' He takes with him 'Isaac his son'; lays the wood on 'Isaac his son.' Isaac 'spake unto Abraham his father'; Abraham answers, 'Here am I, my son'; and again, 'My son, God will provide.' He bound 'Isaac his son'; he 'took the knife to slay his son'; and lastly, in the glad surprise at the end, he offers the ram 'in the stead of his son.' Thus, at every turn, the tender bond is forced on our notice, that we may feel how terrible was the task laid on him—to cut it asunder with his own hand. The friend of God must hold all other love as less than His, and must be ready to yield up the dearest at His bidding. Cruel as the necessity seems to flesh and blood, and specially poignant as his pain was, in essence Abraham's trial only required of him what

Digitized by Google

all true religion requires of us. Some of us have been called by God's providence to give up the light of our eyes, the joy of our homes, to Him. Some of us have had to make the choice between earthly and heavenly love. All of us have to throne God in our hearts, and to let not the dearest usurp His place. In our weakness we may well shrink from such a test. But let us not forget that the trial of Abraham was not imposed by his own mistaken conceptions of duty, nor by a sterner God than the New Testament reveals, but is distinctly set before every Christian in essence, though not in form, by the gentle lips from which flowed the law of love more stringent and exclusive in its claims than any other: 'He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me.'

The conflict in Abraham's soul had a still more painful aspect in that it seemed to rend his very religion into two. Faith in the promise on which he had been living all his life drew one way; faith in the later command, another. God seemed to be against God, faith against faith, promise against command. If he obeys now, what is to become of the hopes that had shone for years before him? His whole career will be rendered nugatory, and with his own hand he will crush to powder his life's work. That wonderful short dialogue which broke the stern silence of the journey seems to throw light on his mood. There is nothing in literature sacred or secular, fact or fiction, poetry or prose, more touching than the innocent curiosity of Isaac's boyish question, and the yearning self-restraint of the father's desperate and yet calm answer. But its value is not only in its pathos. It seems to show that, though he knew not how, still he held by the hope that somehow God would not forget

Digitized by Google

His promise. Out of his very despair, his faith struck, out of the flint of the hard command, a little spark which served to give some flicker of light amid the darkness. His answer to his boy does not make his sacrifice less, but his faith more. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews gives a somewhat different turn to his hopes, when he tells us that he offered up the heir of the promises, 'accounting that God was able to raise him from the dead.' Both ways of clinging to the early promise, even while obeying the later command, seem to have passed through his mind. The wavering from the one to the other is natural. He is sure that God had not lied before, and means what He commands now. He is sure that there is some point of reconciliation—perhaps this, perhaps that, but certainly somewhat. So he goes straight on the road marked for him, quite sure that it will not end in a blind alley, from which there is no exit. That is the very climax of faith—to trust God so absolutely, even when His ways seem contradictory, as to be more willing to believe apparent impossibilities than to doubt Him, and to be therefore ready for the hardest trial of obedience. We, too, have sometimes to take courses which seem to annihilate the hope and aims of a life. The lesson for us is to go straight on the path of clear duty wherever it leads. If it seem to bring us up to inaccessible cliffs, we may be sure that when we get there we shall find some ledge, though it may be no broader than a chamois could tread, which will suffice for a path. If it seem to bring us to a deep and bridgeless stream, we shall find a ford when we get to the water's edge. If the mountains seem to draw together and bar a passage, we shall find, when we reach them, that they open out; though

Digitized by Google

it may be no wider than a cañon, still the stream can get through, and our boat with it.

3. So we have the climax of the story—faith rewarded. The first great lesson which the interposition of the Divine voice teaches us, is that obedience is complete when the inward surrender is complete. The outward act was needless. Abraham would have done no more if the flashing knife had buried itself in Isaac's heart. Here is the first great proclamation of the truth which revolutionises morality and religion, the beginnings of the teaching which culminates in the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount, and in the gospel of salvation, not by deeds, but through faith. The will is the man, the true action is the submission of the will. The outward deed is only the coarse medium through which it is made visible for men: God looks on purpose as performance.

Again, faith is rewarded by God's acceptance and approval. 'I know that thou fearest God,' not meaning that He learned the heart by the conduct, but that, on occasion of the conduct, He breathes into the obedient heart that calm consciousness of its service as recognised and accepted by Him, which is the highest reward that His friend can know. 'To be well pleasing to Him' is our noblest aim, which, cherished, makes sacrifice sweet, and all difficult things easy. 'Nor know we anything more fair Than is the smile upon Thy face.'

Again, faith is rewarded by a deeper insight into God's will. Much has been said about the sacrifice of Isaac in its bearing upon the custom of human sacrifice. We do not believe that Abraham was led to his act by a mistaken idea, borrowed from surrounding idolatries. His position as the sole monotheist amid

Digitized by Google

these, the absence of evidence that human sacrifice was practised then among his neighbours, and, above all, the fact of the divine approval of his intention, forbid our acceptance of that theory. Nor can we regard the condemnation of such sacrifices as the main object of the incident. But no doubt an incidental result, and, we may perhaps say, a subsidiary purpose of it, was to stamp all such hideous usages with the brand of God's displeasure. The mode of thought which led to them was deeply rooted in the consciousness of the Old World, and corresponded to a true conception of the needs of humanity. The dark sense of sin, the conviction that it required expiation, and that procurable only by death, drove men to these horrid rites. And that ram, caught in the thicket, thorn-crowned and substituted for the human victim, taught Abraham and his sons that God appointed and provided a lamb for an offering. It was a lesson won by faith. Nor need we hesitate to see some dim forecast of the great Substitute whom God provided, who bears the sins of the world.

Again, faith is rewarded by receiving back the surrendered blessing, made more precious because it has been laid on the altar. How strange and solemn must have been the joy with which these two looked in each other's faces! What thankful wonder must have filled Abraham's heart as he loosed the cord that had bound his son! It would be many days before the thrill of gratitude died away, and the possession of his son seemed to Abraham, or that of life seemed to Isaac, a common thing. He was doubly now a child of wonder, born by miracle, delivered by miracle. So is it ever. God gives us back our sacrifices, tinged with a new beauty, and purified from earthly alloy.

Digitized by Google

We never know how sweet our blessings are till we have yielded them to Him. 'There is no man that hath left' anything or any person for Christ's sake and the gospel's who will not 'receive a hundred-fold more in this life, and in the world to come life everlasting.'

Lastly, Abraham was rewarded by being made a faint adumbration, for all time, of the yet more wondrous and awful love of the divine Father, who, for our sakes, has surrendered His only-begotten Son, whom He loved. Paul quotes the very words of this chapter when he says: 'He that *spared* not His *own Son*, but delivered Him up for us all.' Such thoughts carry us into dim regions, in which, perhaps, silence is best. Did some shadow of loss and pain pass over the divine all-sufficiency and joy, when He sent His Son? Was the unresisting innocence of the son a far-off likeness of the willing eagerness of the sinless Sufferer who chose to die? Was the resolved surrender of the father a faint prelude of the deep divine love which gave His only Son for us? Shall we not say, 'Now I know that Thou lovest me, because Thou hast not withheld Thy Son, Thine only Son, from me'? Shall we not recognise this as the crown of Abraham's reward, that his act of surrender of his dearest to God, his Friend, has been glorified by being made the mirror of God's unspeakable gift of His Son to us, His enemies?

Digitized by Google

THE CROWNING TEST AND TRIUMPH OF FAITH

II

THE first words of this lesson give the keynote for its meaning. 'God did prove Abraham'; the strange command was a test of his faith. In recent times the incident has been regarded chiefly as embodying a protest against child-sacrifices, and no doubt that is part of its intention, and their condemnation was part of its effect, but the other is the principal thing. Abraham, as the 'Father of the Faithful,' has his faith tested by a series of events from his setting out from Haran, and they culminate in this sharpest of all, the command to slay his son. The life of faith is ever a life of testing, and very often the fire that tries increases in heat as life advances. The worst conflicts are not always at the beginning of the war.

Our best way of knowing ourselves is to observe our own conduct, especially when it is hard to do nobly. We may easily cheat ourselves about what is the basis and ruling motive of our lives, but our actions will show it us. God does not 'test' us as if He did not know what was gold and what base metal, but the proving is meant to make clear to others and ourselves what is the worth and strength of our religion. The test is also a means of increasing the faith which it demonstrates, so that the exhortation to 'count it all joy' to have faith tried is no over-strained counsel of perfection.

The narrative plainly declares that the command

Digitized by Google

to sacrifice his son was to Abraham unmistakably divine. The explanation that Abraham, living beside peoples who practised child-sacrifice, heard but the voice of his own conscience asking, 'Canst thou do for Jehovah what these do for Moloch?' does not correspond to the record. No doubt God does speak through conscience; but what sent Abraham on his terrible journey was a command which he knew did not spring up within, but came to him from above. We may believe or disbelieve the possibility or the actuality of such direct and distinguishable commands from God, but we do not face the facts of this narrative unless we recognise that it asserts that God made His will known to Abraham, and that Abraham knew that it was God's will, not his own thought.

But is it conceivable that God should ever bid a man commit a crime? To the question put in that bald way, of course there can be but one answer, No. But several conditions have to be taken into account. First, it is conceivable that God should test a man's willingness to surrender what is most precious to him, and what all his hopes are fixed on; and this command was given with the purpose that it should not be obeyed in fact, if the willingness to obey it was proved. Again, the stage of development of the moral sense at which Abraham stood has to be remembered. The child-sacrifices around him were not regarded as crimes, but as worship, and, while his affections were the same as ours, and his father's heart was wrung, to slay Isaac did not present itself to him as a crime in the way in which it does so to us. God deals with men on the moral and spiritual level to which they have attained, and, by descending to it, raises them higher.

Digitized by Google

The purpose of the command was to test faith, even more than to test whether earthly love or heavenly obedience were the stronger. There is a beautiful and instructive climax in the designations of Isaac in verse 2, where four times he is referred to, 'thy son, thine only son,' in whom all the hopes of fulfilment of the divine promise were concentrated, so that, if this fruit from the aged tree were cut off, no other could ever grow; 'whom thou lovest,'—there the sharp point pierces the father's heart; 'even Isaac,' in which name all the ties that knit him to Abraham are gathered up. Each word heightens the greatness of the sacrifice demanded, and is a fresh thrust of the dagger into Abraham's very life. Each suggests a reason for not slaying Isaac, which sense might plead. God does not hide the painfulness of surrender from us. The more precious the treasure is, the more are we bound to lay it on the altar. But it was Abraham's faith even more than his love that was tested. The Epistle to the Hebrews lays hold on this as the main element in the trial, that he who 'had received the promises' was called to do what seemed to blast all hope of their being fulfilled. What a cruel position to have God's command and God's promise apparently in diametrical opposition! But faith loosened even that seemingly inextricable tangle of contradiction, and felt that to obey was for man, and to keep His promise was for God. If we do our duty, He will see to the consequences. 'Tis mine to obey; 'tis His to provide.'

Nothing in literature is more tenderly touched or more truly imagined than that long, torturing journey —Abraham silent, Isaac silently wondering, the servants silently following. And, like a flash, at last

Digitized by Google

'the place' was seen afar off. How calmly Abraham speaks to the two followers, mastering his heart's throbbing even then! 'We will worship, and come again to you'—was that a 'pious fraud,' or did it not rather indicate that a ray of hope, like pale light from a shrouded sun, shone for him? He 'accounted that God was able to raise him up even from the dead.' Somehow, he knew not how, Isaac slain was still to live and inherit the promises. Anything was possible, but that God's word should fail was impossible. That picture of the father and son alone, the one bearing the wood, the other the fire and the knife, exchanging no word but once, when the innocent wonder of Isaac's question must have shaken Abraham's steadfastness, and made it hard for him to steady his voice to answer, touches the deepest springs of pity and pathetic sublimity. But the answer is in the same spirit as that to the servants, and indicates the same hope. 'God will provide Himself a lamb, my son.' He does not know definitely what he expects; he is ready to slay Isaac, but his faith is not quenched, though the end seems so inevitable and near. Faith was never more sharply tested, and never more triumphantly stood the test.

The divine solution of the riddle was kept back till the last moment, as it usually is. The place is slowly reached, the hill slowly climbed, the altar built, the unresisting Isaac bound (with what deep thoughts in each, who can tell?), the steady hand holding the glittering knife lifted—a moment more and it will be red with heart's blood, and not till then does God speak. It is ever so. The trial has 'its perfect work.' Faith is led to the edge of the precipice, one step farther and all is over. Then God speaks, all but

Digitized by Google

just too late, and yet 'right early.' The willingness to make the sacrifice is tested to the utmost, and being proved, the sacrifice is not required.

Abraham had said to Isaac, 'God will provide a lamb,' and the word 'provide' is that which appears in the name he gave to the place—Jehovah-*jireh*. The name, then, commemorated, not the servant's faith but the Lord's mercy, and the spirit of it was embodied in what became a popular saying, 'In the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.' If faith dwells there, its surrenders will be richly rewarded. How much more dear was Isaac to Abraham as they journeyed back to Beersheba! And whatever we lay on God's altar comes back a 'hundred-fold more in this life,' and brings in the world to come life everlasting.

JEHOVAH-JIREH

'And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah-jireh; (that is, The Lord will provide).'—GENESIS xxii. 14.

As these two, Abraham and Isaac, were travelling up the hill, the son bearing the wood, and the father with the sad burden of the fire and the knife, the boy said: 'Where is the lamb?' and Abraham, thrusting down his emotion and steadying his voice, said: 'My son, God will provide Himself a lamb.' When the wonderful issue of the trial was plain before him, and he looked back upon it, the one thought that rose in his mind was of how, beyond his meaning, his words had been true. So he named that place by a name that spoke nothing of his trial, but everything of God's provision—'The Lord will see,' or 'The Lord will provide.'

Digitized by Google

1. The words have become proverbial and threadbare as a commonplace of Christian feeling. But it may be worth our while to ask for a moment what it was exactly that Abraham expected the Lord to provide. We generally use the expression in reference to outward things, and see in it the assurance that we shall not be left without the supply of the necessities for which, because God has made us to feel them, He has bound Himself to make provision. And most blessedly true is that application of them, and many a Christian heart in days of famine has been satisfied with the promise, when the bread that was given has been scant.

But there is a meaning deeper than that in the words. It is true, thank God! that we may cast all our anxiety about all outward things upon Him, in the assurance that He who feeds the ravens will feed us, and that if lilies can blossom into beauty without care, we shall be held by our Father of more value than these. But there is a deeper meaning in the provision spoken of here. What was it that God provided for Abraham? What is it that God provides for us? A way to discharge the arduous duties which, when they are commanded, seem all but impossible for us, and which, the nearer we come to them, [illegible] the more dreadful and seem the more impossible. And yet, when the heart has yielded itself in obedience, and we are ready to do the thing that is enjoined, there opens up before us a possibility provided by God, and strength comes to us equal to our day, and some unexpected gift is put into our hand, which enables us to do the thing of which Nature said: 'My heart will break before I can do it'; and in regard to which even Grace doubted whether it was possible for

Digitized by Google

us to carry it through. If our hearts are set in obedience to the command, the farther we go on the path of obedience, the easier the command will appear, and to try to do it is to ensure that God will help us to do it.

This is the main provision that God makes, and it is the highest provision that He can make. For there is nothing in this life that we need so much as to do the will of our Father in heaven. All outward wants are poor compared with that. The one thing worth living for, the one thing which being secured we are blessed, and being missed we are miserable, is compliance in heart with the commandment of our Father; and that compliance wrought out in life. So, of all gifts that He bestows upon us, and of all the abundant provision out of His rich storehouses, is not this the best, that we are made ready for any required service? When we get to the place we shall find some lamb 'caught in the thicket by its horns'; and heaven itself will supply what is needful for our burnt offering.

And then there is another thought here which, though we cannot certainly say it was in the speaker's mind, is distinctly in the historian's intention, 'The Lord will provide.' Provide what? The lamb for the burnt offering which He has commanded. It seems probable that that bare mountain-top which Abraham saw from afar, and named Jehovah-jireh, was the mountain-top on which afterwards the Temple was built. And perhaps the wood was piled for the altar, on which Abraham was called to lay his only son, on that very piece of primitive rock which still stands visible, though Temple and altar have long since gone; and which for many a day was the place of the altar on which the sacrifices of Israel were

Digitized by Google

offered. It is no mere forcing of Christian meanings on to old stories, but the discerning of that prophetic and spiritual element which God has impressed upon these histories of the past, especially in all their climaxes and crises, when we see in the fact that God provided the ram which became the appointed sacrifice, through which Isaac's life was preserved, a dim adumbration of the great truth that the only Sacrifice which God accepts for the world's sin is the Sacrifice which He Himself has provided.

This is the deepest meaning of all the sacrificial worship, as of Israel so of heathen nations—God Himself will provide a Lamb. The world had built altars, and Israel, by divine appointment, had its altar too. All these express the want which none of them can satisfy. They show that man needed a Sacrifice; and that Sacrifice God has provided. He asked from Abraham less than He gives to us. Abraham's devotion was sealed and certified because he did not withhold his son, his only son, from God. And God's love is sealed because He hath not withheld His only-begotten Son from us.

So this name that came from Abraham's grateful and wondering lips contains a truth which holds true in all regions of our wants. On the lowest level, the outward supply of outward needs; on a higher, the means of discharging hard duties and a path through sharp trials; and, on the highest of all, the spotless sacrifice which alone avails for the world's sins—these are the things which God provides.

2. So, note again on what conditions He provides them.

The incident and the name became the occasion of a proverb, as the historian tells us, which survived

Digitized by Google

down to the period of his writing, and probably long after, when men were accustomed to say, 'In the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.' The provision of all sorts that we need has certain conditions as to the when and the where of the persons to whom it shall be granted. 'In the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.' If we wish to have our outward needs supplied, our outward weaknesses strengthened, power and energy sufficient for duty, wisdom for perplexity, a share in the Sacrifice which taketh away the sins of the world, we receive them all on the condition that we are found in the place where all God's provision is treasured. If a man chooses to sit outside the baker's shop, he may starve on its threshold. If a man will not go into the bank, his pockets will be empty, though there may be bursting coffers there to which he has a right. And if we will not ascend to the hill of the Lord, and stand in His holy place by simple faith, and by true communion of heart and life, God's amplest provision is nought to us; and we are empty in the midst of affluence. Get near to God if you would partake of what He has prepared. Live in fellowship with Him by simple love, and often meditate on Him, if you would drink in of His fulness. And be sure of this, that howsoever within His house the stores are heaped and the treasury full, you will have neither part nor lot in the matter, unless you are children of the house. 'In the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.' And round it there is a waste wilderness of famine and of death.

Further, note *when* the provision is realised.

When the man is standing with the knife in his hand, and next minute it will be red with the son's blood—then the call comes: 'Abraham!' and then

Digitized by Google

he sees the ram caught in the thicket. There had been a long weary journey from their home away down in the dry, sunny south, a long tramp over the rough hills, a toilsome climb, with a breaking heart in the father's bosom, and a dim foreboding gradually stealing on the child's spirit. But there was no sign of respite or of deliverance. Slowly he piles together the wood, and yet no sign. Slowly he binds his boy, and lays him on it, and still no sign. Slowly, reluctantly, and yet resolvedly, he unsheathes the knife, and yet no sign. He lifts his hand, and then it comes.

That is God's way always. Up to the very edge we are driven, before His hand is put out to help us. Such is the law, not only because the next moment is always necessarily dark, nor because God will deal with us in any arbitrary fashion, and play with our fears, but because it is best for us that we should be forced to desperation, and out of desperation should 'pluck the flower, safety.' It is best for us that we should be brought to say, 'My foot slippeth!' and then, just as our toes are sliding upon the glacier, the help comes and 'Thy mercy held me up.' 'The Lord is her helper, and that right early.' When He delays, it is not to trifle with us, but to do us good by the sense of need, as well as by the experience of deliverance. At the last moment, never before it, never until we have found out how much we need it, and never too late, comes the Helper.

So 'it is provided' for the people that quietly and persistently tread the path of duty, and go wherever His hand leads them, without asking anything about where it does lead. The condition of the provision is our obedience of heart and will. To Abraham

Digitized by Google

doing what he was commanded, though his heart was breaking as he did it, the help was granted—as it always will be.

3. And so, lastly, note what we are to do with the provision when we get it.

Abraham christened the anonymous mountain-top, not by a name that reminded him or others of his trial, but by a name that proclaimed God's deliverance. He did not say anything about his agony or about his obedience. God spoke about that, not Abraham. He did not want these to be remembered, but what he desired to hand on to later generations was what God had done for him. Oh! dear friends, is that the way in which we look back upon life? Many a bare, bald mountain-top in your career and mine we have got our names for. Are they names that commemorate our sufferings or God's blessings? When we look back on the past what do we see? Times of trial or times of deliverance? Which side of the wave do we choose to look at, the one that is smitten by the sunshine or the one that is all black and purple in the shadow? The sea looked at from the one side will be all a sunny path, and from the other dark as chaos. Let us name the heights that lie behind us, visible to memory, by names that commemorate, not the troubles that we had on them, but the deliverances that on them we received from God.

This name enshrines the duty of commemoration—ay! and the duty of expectation. 'The Lord will provide.' How do you know that, Abraham? and his answer is, 'Because the Lord did provide.' That is a shaky kind of argument if we use it about one another. Our resources may give out, our patience may weary. If it is a storehouse that we have to

Digitized by Google

go to, all the corn that is treasured in it will be eaten up some day; but if it is to some boundless plain that grows it that we go, then we can be sure that there will be a harvest next year as there has been a harvest last. And so we have to think of God, not as a storehouse, but as the soil from which there comes forth, year by year and generation after generation, the same crop of rich blessings for the needs and the hungers of every soul. If we have to draw from reservoirs we cannot say, 'I have gone with my pitcher to the well six times, and I shall get it filled at the seventh.' It is more probable that we shall have to say, 'I have gone so often that I durst not go any more'; but if we have to go, not to a well, but to a fountain, then the oftener we go, the surer we become that its crystal cool waters will always be ready for us. 'Thou hast been with me in six troubles; and in seven thou wilt not forsake me,' is a bad conclusion to draw about one another; but it is the right conclusion to draw about God.

And so, as we look back upon our past lives, and see many a peak gleaming in the magic light of memory, let us name them all by names that will throw a radiance of hope on the unknown and unclimbed difficulties before us, and say, as the patriarch did when he went down from the mount of his trial and deliverance, 'The Lord will provide.'

Digitized by Google

GUIDANCE IN THE WAY

'I being in the way, the Lord led me.'—GENESIS xxiv. 27.

So said Abraham's anonymous servant when telling how he had found Rebekah at the well, and known her to be the destined bride of his master's servant. There is no more beautiful page, even amongst the many lovely ones in these ancient stories, than this domestic idyll of the mission of the faithful servant from far Canaan across the desert. The homely test by which he would determine that the maiden should be pointed out to him, the glimpse of old-world ways at the well, the gracious courtesy of the fair damsel, and the simple devoutness of the speaker, who recognises in what to others were trivial commonplaces God's guidance to the end which He had appointed, his recognition of the divine hand moving beneath all the nothings and littlenesses of daily life—may teach us much.

1. The first thing that these words seem to me to suggest is the conditions under which we may be sure that God leads—'I being in the way.'

Now, of course, some of you may know that the words of our text are, by the Revised Version and others, rendered so as to obliterate the clause telling where the speaker was when the Lord led him, and to make the whole a continuous expression of the one fact—'As for me, the Lord hath led me in the way to the house of my master's brethren.' The literal rendering is, 'I in the way, Jehovah led me.' No doubt the Hebrew idiom admits of the 'I' being thus emphatically premised, and then repeated as 'me' after the verb, and possibly no more is to be

Digitized by Google

made of the words than that. But the fuller and more impressive meaning is possible, and I venture to retain it, and to see in it the expression of the truth that it is when we are 'in the way' that God will certainly lead us.

So that suggests, first, how the people that have any right to expect any kind of guidance from God are those who have their feet upon a path which conscience approves. Many men run into all manner of perplexities by their own folly and self-will, and never ask whether their acts are right or wrong, wise or foolish, until they begin to taste the bitter consequences. Then they cry to God to help them, and think themselves very religious because they do. That is *not* the way to get God's help. Such folk are like Italian brigands who had an image of the Virgin in their hats, and sometimes had the Pope's commission in their pockets, and therefore went out to murder and ravish, in sure and certain hope of God's favour and protection.

But when we are 'in the way,' and know that we are doing what we ought to do, and conscience says, 'Go on; never mind what stands against you,' it is then, and only then, that we have a right to be sure that the Lord will lead us. Otherwise, the best thing that can happen to us is that the Lord should thwart us when we are on the wrong road. Resistance, indeed, may be guidance; and it is often God's manner of setting our feet in the way of His steps. We have no claim on Him for guidance, indeed, unless we have submitted ourselves to His commandments; yet His mercies go beyond our claims. Just as the obedient child gets guidance, so the petulant and disobedient child gets resistance, which is guidance too. The

Digitized by Google

angel of the Lord stands in front of Balaam, amongst the vines, though the seer sometimes does not see, and blocks the path for him, and hedges up the way with his flaming sword. Only, if we would have the sweet, gracious, companionable guidance of our Lord, let us be sure, to begin with, that we are 'in the way,' and not in any of the bypaths into which arrogance and self-will and fleshly desires and the like are only too apt to divert our feet.

Another consideration suggested by these words, 'I being in the way,' is that if we expect guidance we must diligently do present duty. We are led, thank God, by one step at a time. He does with His child, whom He is teaching to read His will, as we sometimes do with our children, when we are occupied in teaching them their first book-learning: we cover the page up, all but the line that we want them to concentrate their eyes upon; and then, when they have got to the end of that, slip the hand down, low enough to allow the next line to come into view. So often God does with us. One thing at a time is enough for the little brains. And this is the condition of mortal life, for the most part—though there do come rare exceptions. Not that we have to look a long way ahead, and forecast what we shall do this time ten years off, or to make decisions that involve a distant future—except once or twice in a lifetime—but that we have to settle what is to be done in this flying minute, and in the one adjacent to it. 'Do the duty that lies nearest thee,' and the remoter duty will become clearer. There is nothing that has more power to make a man's path plain before his feet than that he should concentrate his better self on the manful and complete discharge of the present moment's

Digitized by Google

service. And, on the other hand, there is nothing that will so fill our sky with mists, and blur the marks of the faint track through the moor, as present negligence, or still more, present sin. Iron in a ship's hull makes the magnet tremble, and point away from its true source. He that has complied with evil to-day is the less capable of discerning duty to-morrow; and he that does all the duty that he knows will thereby increase the probability that he will know all that he needs. 'If any man wills to do His will, he shall know of the teaching'—enough, at any rate, to direct his steps.

But there is another lesson still in the words; and that is that, if we are to be guided, we must see to it that we expect and obey the guidance.

This servant of Abraham's, with a very imperfect knowledge of the divine will, had, when he set out on his road, prayed very earnestly that God would lead him. He had ventured to prescribe a certain token, naïve in its simplicity: 'If the girl drops her pitcher, and gives us drink gladly, and does not grudge to fill the troughs for the cattle, that will show that she is of a good sort, and will make the right wife for Isaac.' He had prayed thus, and he was ready to accept whomsoever God so designated. He had not made up his mind, 'Bethuel's daughter is a relation of my master's, and so she will be a suitable wife for his son.' He left it all with God, and then he went straight on his road, and was perfectly sure that he would get the guidance that he had sought. And when it came the good man bowed and obeyed.

Now there is a picture for us all. There are many people that say, 'O Lord! guide me,' when all the while they mean, 'Let me guide Thee.' They are perfectly willing to accept the faintest and most

Digitized by Google

questionable indications that may seem to point down the road where their inclination drives them, and like Lord Nelson at Copenhagen, will put the telescope to the blind eye when the flag is flying at the admiral's peak, signalling 'Come out of action,' because they are determined to stay where they are.

Do not let us forget that the first condition of securing real guidance in our daily life is to ask it, and that the next is to look for it, and that a third is to be quite willing to accept it, whether the finger points down the broad road that we would like to go upon, or through some tangled path amongst the brushwood that we would fain avoid. And if you and I, dear brethren, in the littlenesses of our daily life, do fulfil these conditions, the heavens will crumble, and earth will melt, before God will leave His child untaught in the way in which he should go.

Only, let us be patient. Do you remember what Joshua said to the Israelites? 'Let there be a good space of vacant ground between you and the guiding ark, that you may know by which way you ought to go.' When men precipitately press on the heels of half-disclosed providences, they are uncommonly apt to mistake the road. We must wait till we are sure of God's will before we try to do it. If we are not sure of what He would have us do, then, for the present, He would have us do nothing until He speaks. 'I being in the way, the Lord led me.'

2. Now a word about the manner of the guidance.

There was no miracle, no supernatural voice, no pillar of cloud or fire, no hovering glory round the head of the village maiden. All the indications were perfectly natural and trivial. A thousand girls had gone to the wells that day all about Haran and done

Digitized by Google

the very same things that Rebekah did. But the devout man who had prayed for guidance, and was sure that he was getting it, was guided by her most simple, commonplace act; and that is how we are usually to be guided. God leaves a great deal to our common sense. His way of speaking to common sense is by very common things. If any of us fancy that some glow at the heart, some sudden flash as of inspiration, is the test of a divine commandment, we have yet to learn the full meaning of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. For that Incarnation, amongst all its other mighty influences, hallowed the commonest things of life and turned them into ministers of God's purposes. So remember, God's guidance may come to you through so insignificant a girl as Rebekah. It may come to you through as commonplace an incident as tipping the water of a spring out of an earthen pot into a stone trough. None the less is it God's guidance; and what we want is the eye to see it. He will guide us by very common indications of His providence.

3. And now, the last thing that I would say a word about is the realisation in daily life of this guidance as a plain actual fact.

This anonymous trusted servant of Abraham's, whose name we should like to have known, had a mere segment of the full orb of the knowledge of God that shines upon our path. With true Oriental freedom to speak about the deepest matters, he was not afraid nor ashamed to stand before Bethuel and Laban, and all these other strangers that crowded round the doorway, and say, 'The Lord led me.' There is a pattern for some of us tongue-tied, shamefaced Christians. Whatever may be the truth about the

Digitized by Google

degradations of which heathen religion is full, there is a great deal in heathen religion that ought to teach, and does teach, Christendom a lesson, as to willingness to recognise and to confess God's working in daily life. It may be very superficial; it may be very little connected with high morality; but so far as it goes it is a thousand-fold better than the dumb religion that characterises such hosts of Christian people.

A realisation of the divine guidance is the talisman that makes crooked things straight and rough places plain; that brings peace and calmness into our hearts, amid all changes, losses, and sorrows. If we hold fast by that faith, it will interpret for us the mysterious in the providences concerning our own lives, and will help us to feel that, as I said, resistance to our progress may be true guidance, and thwarting our wills may be our highest good. For the road which we travel should, in all its turnings, lead us to God; and whatsoever guides us to Him is only and always blessed.

May I, for one moment, turn these words in another direction, and remind you, dear friends, of how the sublimest application of them is still to be realised? As a climber on a mountain-peak may look down the vale up which he had painfully toiled for many days and see the dusty path lying, like a sinuous snake, down all along it, so, when we get up yonder, 'Thou shalt remember all the way by which the Lord thy God hath led thee these many years in the wilderness,' and shalt see the green pastures and the still waters, valleys of the shadow of death, and burning roads with sharp flints, which have all brought thee hither at last. We shall know then what we believe now, that the Lord does indeed go before them who desire to follow Him, and that the God of Israel is

Digitized by Google

their rereward. Then we shall say with deepened thankfulness, deepened by complete understanding of life here, seen in the light of its attained end, 'I being in the way, the Lord led me,' and 'I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.'

THE DEATH OF ABRAHAM

'Then Abraham gave up the ghost, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years; and was gathered to his people.'—GENESIS xxv. 8.

'FULL of years' does not seem to me to be a mere synonym for longevity. That would be an intolerable tautology, for we should then have the same thing said three times over—'an old man,' 'in a good old age,' 'full of years.' There must be some other idea than that in the words. If you notice that the expression is by no means a usual one, that it is only applied to one or two of the Old Testament characters, and those selected characters, I think you will see that there must be some other significance in it than merely to point to length of days.

It may be well to note the instances. In addition to our text, we find it employed, first, in reference to Isaac, in Genesis xxxv. 29, where the words are repeated almost *verbatim*. That calm, contemplative life, so unlike the active, varied career of his father, also attained to this blessing at its close. Then we find that the stormy and adventurous course of the great king David, with its wonderful alternations both of moral character and of fortune, is represented as being closed at last with this tranquil evening glory: 'He died in a good old age, full of days, riches, and honour.' Once more we read of the great high priest Jehoiada, whose history had been crowded

Digitized by Google

with peril, change, brave resistance, and strenuous effort, that with all the storms behind him he died at last, 'full of days.' The only other instance of the occurrence of the phrase is at the close of the book of Job, the typical record of the good man suffering, and of the abundant compensations given by a loving God. The fair picture of returning prosperity and family joy, like the calm morning sunshine after a night of storm and wreck, with which that wonderful book ends, has this for its last touch, evidently intended to deepen the impression of peace which is breathed over it all: 'So Job died, being old and full of days.' These are all the instances of the occurrence of this phrase, and I think we may fairly say that in all it is meant to suggest not merely length of days, but some characteristic of the long life over and above its mere length. We shall, I think, understand its meaning a little better if we make a very slight and entirely warranted change, and instead of reading '*full* of years,' read '*satisfied* with years.' The men were satisfied with life; having exhausted its possibilities, having drunk a full draught, having nothing more left to wish for. The words point to a calm close, with all desires gratified, with hot wishes stilled, with no desperate clinging to life, but a willingness to let it go, because all which it could give had been attained.

So much for one of the remarkable expressions in this verse. There is another, 'He was gathered to his people,' of which we shall have more to say presently. Enough for the present to note the peculiarity, and to suggest that it seems to contain some dim hint of a future life, and some glimmer of some of the profoundest thoughts about it.

Digitized by Google

We have two main things to consider.

1. The tranquil close of a life.

It is possible, then, at the end of life to feel that it has satisfied one's wishes. Whether it does or no will depend mostly on ourselves, and very slightly on our circumstances. Length of days, competence, health, and friends are important; but neither these nor any other externals will make the difference between a life which, in the retrospect, will seem to have been sufficient for our desires, and one which leaves a hunger in the heart. It is possible for us to make our lives of such a sort, that whether they run on to the apparent maturity of old age, or whether they are cut short in the midst of our days, we may rise from the table feeling that it has satisfied our desires, met our anticipation, and been all very good.

Possibly, that is not the way in which most of us look at life. That is not the way in which a great many of us seem to think that it is an eminent part of Christian and religious character to look at life. But it is the way in which the highest type of devotion and the truest goodness always look at it. There are people, old and young, who, whenever they look back, whether it be over a long tract of years or over a short one, have nothing to say about it except: 'Vanity of vanities! all is vanity and vexation of spirit'; a retrospect of weary disappointments and thwarted plans.

How different with some of us the forward and the backward look! Are there not some listening to me, whose past is so dark that it flings black shadows over their future, and who can only cherish hopes for to-morrow, by giving the lie to and forgetting the whole of their yesterdays? It is hard to paint

Digitized by Google

the regions before us like 'the Garden of the Lord,' when we know that the locusts of our own godless desires have made all the land behind us desolate. If your past has been a selfish past, a godless past, in which passion, inclination, whim, anything but conscience and Christ have ruled, your remembrances can scarcely be tranquil; nor your hopes bright. If you have only 'prospects drear,' when you 'backward cast your eye,' it is not wonderful if 'forwards though you cannot see,' you will 'guess and fear.' Such lives, when they come towards an end, are wont to be full of querulous discontent and bitterness. We have all seen godless old men cynical and sour, pleased with nothing, grumbling, or feebly complaining, about everything, dissatisfied with all which life has thus far yielded them, and yet clinging desperately to it, and afraid to go.

Put by the side of such an end this calm picture of the old man going down into his grave, and looking back over all those long days since he came away from his father's house, and became a pilgrim and a stranger. How all the hot anxieties, desires, occupations, of youth have quieted themselves down! How far away now seem the warlike days when he fought the invading kings! How far away the heaviness of heart when he journeyed to Mount Moriah with his boy, and whetted the knife to slay his son! His love had all been buried in Sarah's grave. He has been a lonely man for many years; and yet he looks back, as God looked back over His creative week, and feels that all has been good. 'It was all for the best; the great procession of my life has been ordered from the beginning to its end, by the Hand that shapes beauty everywhere, and has made all things blessed

Digitized by Google

and sweet. I have drunk a full draught; I have had enough; I bless the Giver of the feast, and push my chair back; and get up and go away.' He died an old man, and satisfied with his life.

Ay! And what a contrast that makes, dear friends, to another set of people. There is nothing more miserable than to see a man, as his years go by, gripping harder and tighter at this poor, fleeting world that is slipping away from him; nothing sadder than to see how, as opportunities and capacities for the enjoyment of life dwindle, and dwindle, and dwindle, people become almost fierce in the desire to keep it. Why, you can see on the face of many an old man and woman a hungry discontent, that has not come from the mere wrinkles of old age or care; an eager acquisitiveness looking out of the dim old eyes, tragical and awful. It is sad to see a man, as the world goes from him, grasping at its skirts as a beggar does at the retreating passer-by that refuses him an alms. Are there not some of us who feel that this is our case, that the less we have before us of life here on earth, the more eagerly we grasp at the little which still remains; trying to get some last drops out of the broken cistern which we know can hold no water? How different this blessed acquiescence in the fleeting away of the fleeting; and this contented satisfaction with the portion that has been given him, which this man had who died willingly, being satisfied with life!

Sometimes, too, there is satiety—weariness of life which is not satisfaction, though it looks like it. Its language is: 'Man delights me not; nor woman neither. I am tired of it all.' Those who feel thus sit at the table without an appetite. They think

Digitized by Google

that they have seen to the bottom of everything, and they have found everything a cheat. They expect nothing new under the sun; that which is to be hath already been, and it is all vanity and striving after the wind. They are at once satiated and dissatisfied. Nothing keeps the power to charm.

How different from all this is the temper expressed in this text, rightly understood! Abraham had had a richly varied life. It had brought him all he wished. He has drunk a full draught, and needs no more. He is satisfied, but that does not mean loss of interest in present duties, occupations, or enjoyments. It is possible to keep ourselves fully alive to all these till the end, and to preserve something of the keen edge of youth even in old age, by the magic of communion with God, purity of conduct, and a habitual contemplation of all events as sent by our Father. When Paul felt himself very near his end, he yet had interest enough in common things to tell Timothy all about their mutual friends' occupations, and to wish to have his books and parchments.

So, calmly, satisfied and yet not sickened, keenly appreciating all the good and pleasantness of life, and yet quite willing to let it go, Abraham died. So may it be with us too, if we will, no matter what the duration or the externals of our life. If we too are his children by faith, we shall be 'blessed with faithful Abraham.' And I beseech you to ask yourselves whether the course of your life is such as that, if at this moment God's great knife were to come down and cut it in two, you would be able to say, 'Well! I have had enough, and now contentedly I go.'

Again, it is possible at the end of life to feel that it is complete, because the days have accomplished

Digitized by Google

for us the highest purpose of life. Scaffoldings are for buildings, and the moments and days and years of our earthly lives are scaffolding. What are you building inside the scaffolding, brother? What kind of a structure will be disclosed when the scaffolding is knocked away? What is the end for which days and years are given? That they may give us what eternity cannot take away—a character built upon the love of God in Christ, and moulded into His likeness. 'Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him for ever.' Has your life helped you to do that? If it has, though you be but a child, you are full of years; if it has not, though your hair be whitened with the snows of the nineties, you are yet incomplete and immature. The great end of life is to make us like Christ, and pleasing to Christ. If life has done that for us, we have got the best out of it, and our life is completed, whatever may be the number of the days. Quality, not quantity, is the thing that determines the perfectness of a life. And like as in northern lands, where there is only a week or two from the melting of the snow to the cutting of the hay, the whole harvest of a life may be gathered in a very little space, and all be done which is needed to make the life complete. Has your life this completeness? Can you be 'satisfied' with it, because the river of the flowing hours has borne down some grains of gold amidst the mass of mud, and, notwithstanding many sins and failures, you have thus far fulfilled the end of your being, that you are in some measure trusting and serving the Lord Jesus Christ?

Again, it is possible, at the end of life, to be *willing* to go as satisfied.

Digitized by Google

Most men cling to life in grim desperation, like a climber to a cliff giving way, or a drowning man clutching at any straw. How beautiful the contrast of the placid, tranquil acquiescence expressed in that phrase of our text! No doubt there will always be the shrinking of the bodily nature from death. But that may be overcome. There is no passion so weak but in some case it has 'mated and mastered the fear of death,' and it is possible for us all to come to that temper in which we shall be ready for either fortune, to live and serve Him here, or to die and enjoy Him yonder. Or, to return to an earlier illustration, it is possible to be like a man sitting at table, who has had his meal, and is quite contented to stay on there, restful and cheerful, but is not unwilling to put back his chair, to get up and to go away, thanking the Giver for what he has received.

Ah! that is the way to face the end, dear brethren, and how is it to be done? Such a temper need not be the exclusive possession of the old. It may belong to us at all stages of life. How is it won? By a life of devout communion with God. The secret of it lies in obeying the commandment and realising the truth which Abraham realised and obeyed: 'I am the Almighty God, walk before Me, and be thou perfect.' 'Fear not, Abram, I am thy shield and thine exceeding great reward.' That is to say, a simple communion with God, realising His presence and feeling that He is near, will sweeten disappointment, will draw from it its hidden blessedness, will make us victors over its pains and its woes. Such a faith will make it possible to look back and see only blessing; to look forward and see a great light of hope burning in the darkness. Such a faith will check weariness,

Digitized by Google

avert satiety, promote satisfaction, and will help us to feel that life and the great hereafter are but the outer and inner mansions of the Father's house, and death the short though dark corridor between. So we shall be ready for life or for death.

2. Now I must turn to consider more briefly the glimpse of the joyful society beyond, which is given us in that other remarkable expression of our text: 'He was gathered to his people.'

That phrase is only used in the earlier Old Testament books, and there only in reference to a few persons. It is used of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and Aaron, and once (Judges ii. 10) of a whole generation. If you will weigh the words, I think you will see that there is in them a dim intimation of something beyond this present life.

'He was gathered to his people' is not the same thing as 'He died,' for, in the earlier part of the verse, we read, 'Abraham gave up the ghost and died . . . and was gathered to his people.' It is not the same thing as being buried. For we read in the following verse: 'And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron, the son of Zohar the Hittite, which is before Mamre.' It is then the equivalent neither of death nor of burial. It conveys dimly and veiledly that Abraham was buried, and yet that was not all that happened to him. He was buried, but also 'he was gathered to his people.' Why! his own 'people' were buried in Mesopotamia, and his grave was far away from theirs. What is the meaning of the expression? Who were the people he was gathered to? In death or in burial, 'the dust returns to the earth as it was.' What was it that was gathered to his people?

Digitized by Google

Dimly, vaguely, veiledly, but unmistakably, as it seems to me, is here expressed at least a premonition and feeling after the thought of an immortal self in Abraham that was not there in what 'his sons Isaac and Ishmael laid in the cave at Machpelah,' but was somewhere else and was for ever. That is the first thing hinted at here—the continuance of the personal being after death.

Is there anything more? I think there is. Now, remember, Abraham's whole life was shaped by that commandment, 'Get thee out from thy father's house, and from thy kindred, and from thy country.' He never dwelt with his kindred; all his days he was a pilgrim and a sojourner, a stranger in a strange land. And though he was living in the midst of a civilisation which possessed great cities whose walls reached to heaven, he pitched his tent beneath the terebinth tree at Mamre, and would have nothing to do with the order of things around him, but remained an exotic, a waif, an outcast in the midst of Canaan all his life. Why? Because he 'looked for the city which hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God.' And now he has gone to it, he is gathered to his people. The life of isolation is over, the true social life is begun. He is no longer separated from those around him, or flung amidst those that are uncongenial to him. 'He is gathered to his people'; he dwells with his own tribe; he is at home; he is in the city.

And so, brethren, life for every Christian man must be lonely. After all communion we dwell as upon islands dotted over a great archipelago, each upon his little rock, with the sea dashing between us; but the time comes when, if our hearts are set upon that

Digitized by Google

great Lord, whose presence makes us one, there shall be no more sea, and all the isolated rocks shall be parts of a great continent. Death sets the solitary in families. We are here like travellers plodding lonely through the night and the storm, but soon to cross the threshold into the lighted hall, full of friends.

If we cultivate that sense of detachment from the present, and of having our true affinities in the unseen, if we dwell here as strangers because our citizenship is in heaven, then death will not drag us away from our associates, nor hunt us into a lonely land, but will bring us where closer bonds shall knit the 'sweet societies' together, and the sheep shall couch close by one another, because all are gathered round the one shepherd. Then many a broken tie shall be rewoven, and the solitary wanderer meet again the dear ones whom he had 'loved long since, and lost awhile.'

Further, the expressions suggest that in the future men shall be associated according to affinity and character. 'He was gathered to his people,' whom he was like and who were like him; the people with whom he had sympathy, the people whose lives were shaped after the fashion of his own.

Men will be sorted there. Gravitation will come into play undisturbed; and the pebbles will be ranged according to their weights on the great shore where the sea has cast them up, as they are upon Chesil beach, down there in the English Channel, and many another coast besides; all the big ones together and sized off to the smaller ones, regularly and steadily laid out. Like draws to like. Our spiritual affinities, our religious and moral character, will settle where

Digitized by Google

we shall be, and who our companions will be when we get yonder. Some of us would not altogether like to live with the people that are like ourselves, and some of us would not find the result of this sorting to be very delightful. Men in the Dantesque circles were only made more miserable because all around them were of the same sort as, and some of them worse than, themselves. And an ordered hell, with no company for the liar but liars, and none for the thief but thieves, and none for impure men but the impure, and none for the godless but the godless, would be a hell indeed.

'He was gathered to his people,' and you and I will be gathered likewise. What is the conclusion of the whole matter? Let us follow with our thoughts, and in our lives, those who have gone into the light, and cultivate in heart and character those graces and excellences which are congruous with the inheritance of the saints in light. Above all, let us give our hearts to Christ, by simple faith in Him, to be shaped and sanctified by Him. Then our country will be where He is, and our people will be the people in whom His love abides, and the tribe to which we belong will be the tribe of which He is Chieftain. So when our turn comes, we may rise thankfully from the table in the wilderness, which He has spread for us, having eaten as much as we desired, and quietly follow the dark-robed messenger whom His love sends to bring us to the happy multitudes that throng the streets of the city. There we shall find our true home, our kindred, our King. 'So shall *we* ever be with the Lord.'

Digitized by Google

A BAD BARGAIN

'And the boys grew: and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a plain man, dwelling in tents. And Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison: but Rebekah loved Jacob. And Jacob sod pottage: and Esau came from the field, and he was faint: And Esau said to Jacob, Feed me, I pray thee, with that same red pottage; for I am faint: therefore was his name called Edom. And Jacob said, Sell me this day thy birthright. And Esau said, Behold, I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright do to me? And Jacob said, Swear to me this day; and he sware unto him: and he sold his birthright unto Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentiles; and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way: thus Esau despised his birthright.'

GENESIS XXV. 27-34.

ISAAC'S small household represented a great variety of types of character. He himself lacked energy, and seems in later life to have been very much of a tool in the hands of others. Rebekah had the stronger nature, was persistent, energetic, and managed her husband to her heart's content. The twin brothers were strongly opposed in character; and, naturally enough, each parent loved best the child that was most unlike him or her: Isaac rejoicing in the very wildness of the adventurous, dashing Esau; and Rebekah finding an outlet for her womanly tenderness in an undue partiality for the quiet lad that was always at hand to help her and be petted by her.

One's sympathy goes out to Esau. He was 'a man of the field,'—by which is meant, not cultivated ground, but open country, which we might call prairie. He was a 'backwoodsman,'—liked the wild hunter's life better than sticking at home looking after sheep. He had the attractive characteristics of that kind of men, as well as their faults. He was frank, impulsive, generous, incapable of persevering work or of looking ahead, passionate. His descendants

Digitized by Google

prefer cattle-ranching and gold-prospecting to keeping shops or sitting with their lungs squeezed against a desk.

Jacob had neither the high spirits nor the animal courage of his brother. He was 'a plain man.' The word is literally 'perfect,' but cannot be used in its deepest sense; for Jacob was very far indeed from being that, but seems to have a lower sense, which might perhaps be represented by 'steady-going,' or 'respectable,' in modern phraseology. He went quietly about his ordinary work, in contrast with his daring brother's escapades and unsettledness.

The two types are intensified by civilisation, and the antagonism between them increased. City life tends to produce Jacobs, and its Esaus escape from it as soon as they can. But Jacob had the vices as well as the virtues of his qualities. He was orderly and domestic, but he was tricky, and keenly alive to his own interest. He was persevering and almost dogged in his tenacity of purpose, but he was not above taking mean advantages and getting at his ends by miry roads. He had little love for his brother, in whom he saw an obstacle to his ambition. He had the virtues and vices of the commercial spirit.

But we judge the two men wrongly if we let ourselves be fascinated, as Isaac was, by Esau, and forget that the superficial attractions of his character cover a core worthy of disapprobation. They are crude judges of character who prefer the type of man who spurns the restraints of patient industry and order; and popular authors, who make their heroes out of such, err in taste no less than in morals. There is a very unwholesome kind of literature, which is devoted to glorifying the Esaus as fine fellows, with

Digitized by Google

spirit, generosity, and noble carelessness, whereas at bottom they are governed by animal impulses, and incapable of estimating any good which does not appeal to sense, and that at once.

The great lesson of this story lies on its surface. It is the folly and sin of buying present gratification of appetite or sense at the price of giving up far greater future good. The details are picturesquely told. Esau's eagerness, stimulated by the smell of the mess of lentils, is strikingly expressed in the Hebrew: 'Let me devour, I pray thee, of that red, that red there.' It is no sin to be hungry, but to let appetite speak so clamorously indicates feeble self-control. Jacob's coolness is an unpleasant foil to Esau's impatience, and his cautious bargaining, before he will sell what a brother would have given, shows a mean soul, without generous love to his own flesh and blood. Esau lets one ravenous desire hide everything else from him. He wants the pottage which smokes there, and that one poor dish is for the moment more to him than birthright and any future good. Jacob knows the changeableness of Esau's character, and is well aware that a hungry man will promise anything, and, when fed, will break his promise as easily as he made it. So he makes Esau swear; and Esau will do that, or anything asked. He gets his meal. The story graphically describes the greedy relish with which he ate, the short duration of his enjoyment, and the dark meaning of the seemingly insignificant event, by that accumulation of verbs, 'He did eat and drink, and rose up and went his way: so Esau despised his birthright.'

Now we may learn, first, how profound an influence small temptations, yielded to, may exert on a life.

Digitized by Google

Many scoffs have been directed against this story, as if it were unworthy of credence that eating a dish of lentils should have shaped the life of a man and of his descendants. But is it not always the case that trifles turn out to be determining points? Hinges are very small, compared with the doors which move on them. Most lives are moulded by insignificant events. No temptation is small, for no sin is small; and if the occasion of yielding to sense and the present is insignificant, the yielding is not so.

But the main lesson is, as already noted, the madness of flinging away greater future good for present gratifications of sense. One cannot suppose that the spiritual side of 'the birthright' was in the thoughts of either brother. Esau and Jacob alike regarded it only as giving the headship of the family. It was merely the right of succession, with certain material accompanying advantages, which Jacob coveted and Esau parted with. But even in regard to merely worldly objects, the man who lives for only the present moment is distinctly beneath him who lives for a future good, however material it may be. Whoever subordinates the present, and is able steadily to set before himself a remote object, for which he is strong enough to subdue the desire of immediate gratifications of any sort, is, in so far, better than the man who, like a savage or an animal, lives only for the instant.

The highest form of that nobility is when time is clearly seen to be the 'lackey to eternity,' and life's aims are determined with supreme reference to the future beyond the grave. But how many of us are every day doing exactly as Esau did—flinging away a great future for a small present! A man who lives only

Digitized by Google

for such ends as may be attained on this side of the grave is as 'profane' a person as Esau, and despises his birthright as truly. He knew that he was hungry, and that lentil porridge was good. 'What good shall the birthright do me?' He failed to make the effort of mind and imagination needed in order to realise how much of the kind of 'good' that he could appreciate it would do to him. The smell of the smoking food was more to him than far greater good which he could only appreciate by an effort. A sixpence held close to the eye can shut out the sun. Resolute effort is needed to prevent the small, intrusive present from blotting out the transcendent greatness of the final future. And for lack of such effort men by the thousand fling themselves away.

To sell a birthright for a bowl of lentils was plain folly. But is it wiser to sell the blessedness and peace of communion with God here and of heaven hereafter for anything that earth can yield to sense or to soul? How many shrewd 'men of the highest commercial standing' are making as bad a bargain as Esau's! The 'pottage' is hot and comforting, but it is soon eaten; and when the bowl is empty, and the sense of hunger comes back in an hour or two, the transaction does not look quite as advantageous as it did. Esau had many a minute of rueful meditation on his bad bargain before he in vain besought his father's blessing. And suspicions of the folly of their choice are apt to haunt men who prefer the present to the future, even before the future becomes the present, and the folly is manifest. 'What doth it profit a man, to gain the whole world, and forfeit his life?'

So a character like Esau's, though it has many fine

Digitized by Google

possibilities about it, and attracts liking, is really of a low type, and may very easily slide into depths of degrading sensualism, and be dead to all nobleness. Enterprise, love of stirring life, impatience of dull plodding, are natural to young lives. Unregulated, impulsive characters, who live for the moment, and are very sensitive to all material delights, have often an air of generosity and joviality which hides their essential baseness; for it *is* base to live for flesh, either in more refined or more frankly coarse forms. It is base to be incapable of seeing an inch beyond the present. It is base to despise any good that cannot minister to fleeting lusts or fleshly pleasures, and to say of high thought, of ideal aims of any sort, and most of all to say of religion, 'What good will it do me?' To estimate such precious things by the standard of gross utility is like weighing diamonds in grocers' scales. They will do very well for sugar, but not for precious stones. The sacred things of life are not those which do what the Esaus recognise as 'good.' They have another purpose, and are valuable for other ends. Let us take heed, then, that we estimate things according to their true relative worth; that we live, not for to-day, but for eternity; and that we suppress all greedy cravings. If we do not, we shall be 'profane' persons like Esau, 'who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright.'

Digitized by Google

POTTAGE *VERSUS* BIRTHRIGHT

'Esau despised his birthright.'—GENESIS XXV. 34.

BROAD lessons unmistakable, but points strange and difficult to throw oneself back to so different a set of ideas. So

I. Deal with the narrative.

Not to tell it over again, but bring out the following points:—

(*a*) Birthright.—What?

None of them any notion of sacred, spiritual aspect of it.

To all, merely material advantages: headship of the clan. All the loftier aspects gone from Isaac, who thought he could give it for venison, from Esau, and from the scheming Rebekah and the crafty Jacob.

(*b*) The Bargain.

It is not clear whether the transaction was seriously meant, or whether it only shows Jacob's wish to possess the birthright and Esau's indifference to it.

At any rate, the barter was not supposed to complete Jacob's title, as is shown by a subsequent piece of trickery.

Isaac's blessing was conceived to confer it; that blessing, if once given, could not be revoked, even if procured by fraud and given in error.

The belief would fulfil itself, as far as the chieftainship was concerned.

It is significant of the purely 'secular' tone of all the parties concerned that only temporal blessings are included in Isaac's words.

Digitized by Google

(*c*) The Scripture judgment on all parties concerned.

Great mistakes are made by forgetting that the Bible is a passionless narrator of its heroes' acts, and seldom pauses to censure or praise—so people have thought that Scripture gave its vote for Jacob as against Esau.

The character of the two men.

Esau—frank, impulsive, generous, chivalrous, careless, and sensuous.

Jacob—meditative, reflective, pastoral, timid, crafty, selfish. Each has the defects of his qualities.

But the subsequent history of Jacob shows what heaven thought of him.

This dirty transaction marred his life, sent him a terrified exile from Isaac's tent, and shook his soul long years after with guilty apprehensions when he had to meet Esau.

All subsequent career to beat his crafty selfishness out of him and to lift him to higher level.

II. Broad General Lessons.

1. The Choice.—Birthright *versus* Pottage.

(*a*) The Present *versus* The Future.

Suppose it true that to both brothers the birthright seemed to secure merely material advantage, yet even so the better part would have been to sacrifice material present for material future. Even on plane of worldly things, to live for to-morrow ennobles a man, and he is the higher style of man who 'spurns delights and lives laborious days' for some issue to be realised in the far future.

The very same principle extended leads to the conviction that the highest wisdom is his who

Digitized by Google

lives for the furthest, which is also the most certain, Future.

(*b*) The Seen *versus* The Unseen.

However material the advantages of the birthright were supposed to be, they *then* appealed to imagination, not sense. *There* was the pottage in the pan: 'I can see that and smell it. This birthright, can I eat *it*? Let me get the solid realities, and let who will have the imaginary.'

So the unseen good things, such as intellectual culture, fair reputation, and the like, are better than the gross satisfactions that can be handled, or tasted, or seen.

And, on the very same principle, high above the seeker after these—as high as he is above the drunkard—is the Christian, whose life is shaped by the loftiest Unseen, even 'Him who is invisible.'

2. The grim absurdity of the choice.

The story seems to have a certain undertone of sarcasm, and a keen perception of the immense stupidity of the man.

Pottage and a full belly to-day—that was all he got for such a sacrifice.

'This their way is their folly.'

3. How well the bargain worked at first, and what came of it at last.

No doubt Esau had his meal, and, no doubt, when a man sells his soul to the devil (the mediæval form of the story), he generally gets the price for which he bargained, more or less, and oftentimes with a dash of vinegar in the porridge, which makes it less palatable.

Digitized by Google

What comes of it at last. Put side by side the pictures of Esau's animal contentment at the moment when he had eaten up his mess, and of his despair when he wailed, 'Hast thou not one blessing?'

He finds out his mistake. A sense of the preciousness of the despised thing wakes in him.

And it is too late. There *are* irrevocable consequences of every false choice. Youth is gone: cannot alter that. Opportunities gone: cannot alter that. Strength gone: cannot alter that. Habits formed, associations, reputation, position, character, are all determined.

But there is a blessed *contrast* between Esau's experience and what may be ours. The desire to have the birthright is sure to bring it to us. No matter how late the desire is of springing, nor how long and insultingly we have suppressed it, we never go to our Father in vain with the cry, 'Bless me, even me also.'

'What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?'

THE FIRST APOSTLE OF PEACE AT ANY PRICE

'Then Isaac sowed in that land, and received in the same year an hundredfold: and the Lord blessed him. And the man waxed great, and went forward, and grew until he became very great: For he had possession of flocks, and possession of herds, and great store of servants: and the Philistines envied him. For all the wells which his father's servants had digged in the days of Abraham his father, the Philistines had stopped them, and filled them with earth. And Abimelech said unto Isaac, Go from us; for thou art much mightier than we. And Isaac departed thence, and pitched his tent in the valley of Gerar, and dwelt there. And Isaac digged again the wells of water, which they had digged in the days of Abraham his father; for the Philistines had stopped them after the death of Abraham: and he called their names after the names by which his father had called them. And Isaac's servants digged in the valley, and found there a well of springing water. And the herdmen of Gerar did strive with Isaac's herdmen, saying, The water is our's: and he called the name of the well Esek; because they strove with him. And they digged another well, and strove for that also: and he called the name of it Sitnah. And he removed from thence, and digged

Digitized by Google

another well; and for that they strove not: and he called the name of it Rehoboth; and he said, For now the Lord hath made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land. And he went up from thence to Beer-sheba. And the Lord appeared unto him the same night, and said, I am the God of Abraham thy father: fear not, for I am with thee, and will bless thee, and multiply thy seed for my servant Abraham's sake. And he builded an altar there, and called upon the name of the Lord, and pitched his tent there: and there Isaac's servants digged a well.'—GENESIS xxvi. 12-25.

THE salient feature of Isaac's life is that it has no salient features. He lived out his hundred and eighty years in quiet, with little to make history. Few details of his story are given, and some of these are not very creditable. He seems never to have wandered far from the neighbourhood of Beersheba. These quiet, rolling stretches of thinly peopled land contented him, and gave pasture for his flocks, as well as fields for his cultivation. Like many of the tribes of that district still, he had passed from the purely nomad and pastoral life, such as Abraham led, and had begun to 'sow in that land.' That marks a stage in progress. His father's life had been like a midsummer day, with bursts of splendour and heavy thunder-clouds; his was liker a calm day in autumn, windless and unchanging from morning till serene evening. The world thinks little of such lives, but they are fruitful.

Our text begins with a sweet little picture of peaceful industry, blessed by God, and therefore prospering. Travellers tell us that the land where Isaac dwelt is still marvellously fertile, even to rude farming. But to be merely a successful farmer and sheep-owner might have seemed poor work to the heir of such glowing promises, and the prospect of a high destiny often disgusts its possessor with lowly duties. 'But if we hope for that which we see not, then do we with patience wait for it,' and the best way to fit ourselves for great things in the future

Digitized by Google

is to bend our backs and wills to humble toil in the present. Peter expected every day to see the risen Lord, when he said, 'I go a-fishing.'

The Philistines' envy was very natural, since Isaac was an alien, and, in some sense, an intruder. Their stopping of the wells was a common act of hostility, and an effectual one in that land, where everything lives where water comes, and dies if it is cut off. Abimelech's reason for 'extraditing' Isaac might have provoked a more pugnacious person to stay and defy the Philistines to expel him. 'Thou art much mightier than we,' and so he could have said, 'Try to put me out, then,' and the result might have been that Abimelech and his Philistines would have been the ones to go. But the same spirit was in the man as had been in the lad, when he let his father bind him and lay him on the altar without a struggle or a word, and he quietly went, leaving his fields and pastures. 'Very poor-spirited,' says the world; what does Christ say?

Isaac was not 'original.' He cleaned out the wells which his father had digged, and with filial piety gave them again the old names 'which his father had called them.' Some of us nowadays get credit for being 'advanced and liberal thinkers,' because we regard our fathers' wells as much too choked with rubbish to be worth clearing out, and the last thing we should dream of would be to revive the old names. But the old wells were not enough for the new time, and so fresh ones were added. Isaac and his servants did not say, 'We will have no water but what is drawn from Abraham's wells. What was enough for him is enough for us.' So, like all wise men, they were conservatively progressive and

Digitized by Google

progressively conservative. The Gerar shepherds were sharp lawyers. They took strong ground in saying, 'The *water* is ours; you have dug wells, but we are ground-owners, and what is below the surface, as well as what is on it, is our property.' Again Isaac yielded, moved on a little way, and tried again. A second well was claimed, and given up, and all that Isaac did was to name the two 'Contention' and 'Enmity,' as a gentle rebuke and memorial. Then, as is generally the result, gentleness wearied violence out, and the Philistines tired of annoying before Isaac tired of yielding. So he came into a quiet harbour at last, and traced his repose to God, naming his last well 'Broad Places,' because the Lord had made room for him.

Such a quiet spirit, strong in non-resistance, and ready to yield rather than quarrel, was strangely out of place in these wild days and lands. He obeyed the Sermon on the Mount millenniums before it was spoken. Whether from temperament or from faith, he is the first instance of the Christian type of excellence in the Old Testament. For there ought to be no question that the spirit of meekness, which will not meet violence by violence, is the Christian spirit. Christian morals alter the perspective of moral excellences, and exalt meekness above the 'heroic virtues' admired by the world. The violets and lilies in Christ's garden outshine voluptuous roses and flaunting sunflowers. In this day, when there is a recrudescence of militarism, and we are tempted to canonise the soldier, we need more than ever to insist that the highest type is 'the Lamb of God,' who was 'as a sheep before her shearers.' To fight for my rights is not the Christian ideal,

Digitized by Google

nor is it the best way to secure them. Isaac will generally weary out the Philistines, and get his well at last, and will have escaped much friction and many evil passions.

'Tis safer being meek than fierce.'

Isaac won the friendship of his opponents by his patience, as the verses after the text tell. Their consciences and hearts were touched, and they 'saw plainly that the Lord was with him,' and sued him for alliance. It is better to turn enemies into friends than to beat them and have them as enemies still. 'I'll knock you down unless you love me' does not sound a very hopeful way of cementing peaceful relations. But 'when a man's ways please the Lord, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him.' But Isaac won more than the Philistines' favour by his meek peacefulness, for 'the Lord appeared unto him,' and assured him that, undefended and unresisting as he was, he had a strong defence, and need not be afraid: 'Fear not, for I am with thee.' The ornament of a meek and quiet spirit is, in the sight of God, of great price, and that not only for 'a woman'; and it brings visions of God, and assurances of tranquil safety to him who cherishes it. The Spirit of God comes down in the likeness of a dove, and that bird of peace sits 'brooding "only" on the charmed wave' of a heart stilled from strife and wrath, like a quiet summer's sea.

Isaac's new home at Beersheba, having been thus hallowed by the appearance of the Lord, was consecrated by the building of an altar. We should hallow by grateful remembrance the spots where God has made Himself known to us. The best beginning of

Digitized by Google

a new undertaking is to rear an altar. It is well when new settlers begin their work by calling on the name of the Lord. Beersheba and Plymouth Rock are a pair. First comes the altar, then the tent can be trustfully pitched, but 'except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it.' And if the house is built in faith, a well will not be lacking; for they who 'seek first the kingdom of God' will have all needful 'things added unto them.'

THE HEAVENLY PATHWAY AND THE EARTHLY HEART

'And Jacob went out from Beer-sheba, and went toward Haran. And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the Lord stood above it, and said, I am the Lord God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of. And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not. And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven. And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it. And he called the name of that place Beth-el: but the name of that city was called Luz at the first. And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, So that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the Lord be my God: And this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house: and of all that Thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto Thee.'—GENESIS xxviii. 10-22.

FROM Abraham to Jacob is a great descent. The former embodies the nobler side of the Jewish character,—its capacity for religious ideas; its elevation above, and separation from, the nations; its consciousness of, and peaceful satisfaction in, a divine Friend; its consequent vocation in the world. These

Digitized by Google

all were deep in the founder of the race, and flowed to it from him. Jacob, on the other hand, has in him the more ignoble qualities, which Christian treatment of the Jew has fostered, and which have become indissolubly attached to the name in popular usage. He is a crafty schemer, selfish, over-reaching, with a keen eye to the main chance. Whoever deals with him has to look sharply after his own interests. Self-advantage in its most earthly form is uppermost in him; and, like all timid, selfish men, shifty ways and evasions are his natural weapons. The great interest of his history lies in the slow process by which the patient God purified him, and out of this 'stone raised up a worthy child to Abraham.' We see in this context the first step in his education, and the very imperfect degree in which he profited by it.

1. Consider the vision and its accompanying promise. Jacob has fled from home on account of his nobler brother's fierce wrath at the trick which their scheming mother and he had contrived. It was an ugly, heartless fraud, a crime against a doting father, as against Esau. Rebekah gets alarmed for her favourite; and her fertile brain hits upon another device to blind Isaac and get Jacob out of harm's way, in the excuse that she cannot bear his marriage with a Hittite woman. Her exaggerated expressions of passionate dislike to 'the daughters of Heth' have no religious basis. They are partly feigned and partly petulance. So the poor old blind father is beguiled once more, and sends his son away. Starting under such auspices, and coming from such an atmosphere, and journeying back to Haran, the hole of the pit whence Abraham had been digged, and turning his back on the land where God had been with his house,

Digitized by Google

the wanderer was not likely to be cherishing any lofty thoughts. His life was in danger; he was alone, a dim future was before him, perhaps his conscience was not very comfortable. These things would be in his mind as he lay down and gazed into the violet sky so far above him, burning with all its stars. Weary, and with a head full of sordid cares, plans, and possibly fears, he slept; and then there flamed on 'that inward eye, which is the bliss of solitude' to the pure, and its terror to the evil, this vision, which speaks indeed to his then need, as he discerned it, but reveals to him and to us the truth which ennobles all life, burns up the dross of earthward-turned aims, and selfish, crafty ways.

We are to conceive of the form of the vision as a broad stair or sloping ascent, rather than a ladder, reaching right from the sleeper's side to the far-off heaven, its pathway peopled with messengers, and its summit touching the place where a glory shone that paled even the lustrous constellations of that pure sky. Jacob had thought himself alone; the vision peoples the wilderness. He had felt himself defenceless; the vision musters armies for his safety. He had been grovelling on earth, with no thoughts beyond its fleeting goods; the vision lifts his eyes from the low level on which they had been gazing. He had been conscious of but little connection with heaven; the vision shows him a path from his very side right into its depths. He had probably thought that he was leaving the presence of his father's God when he left his father's tent; the vision burns into his astonished heart the consciousness of God as there, in the solitude and the night.

The divine promise is the best commentary on the

Digitized by Google

meaning of the vision. The familiar ancestral promise is repeated to him, and the blessing and the birthright thus confirmed. In addition, special assurances, the translation of the vision into word and adapted to his then wants, are given, — God's presence in his wanderings, his protection, Jacob's return to the land, and the promise of God's persistent presence, working through all paradoxes of providence and sins of His servant, and incapable of staying its operations, or satisfying God's heart, or vindicating His faithfulness, at any point short of complete accomplishment of His plighted word.

We pass from the lone desert and the mysterious twilight of Genesis to the beaten ways between Galilee and Jordan, and to the clear historic daylight of the gospel, and we hear Christ renewing the promise to the crafty Jacob, to one whom He called a son of Jacob in his after better days, 'an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile.' The very heart of Christ's work was unveiled in the terms of this vision: From henceforth 'ye shall see the heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.' So, then, the fleeting vision was a transient revelation of a permanent reality, and a faint foreshadowing of the true communication between heaven and earth. Jesus Christ is the ladder between God and man. On Him all divine gifts descend; by Him all the angels of human devotion, consecration, and aspiration go up. This flat earth is not so far from the topmost heaven as sense thinks. The despairing question of Jewish wisdom, 'Who hath ascended up into heaven, or descended? . . . What is his name, and what is his son's name, if thou canst tell?'—which has likewise been the question of every age that has not

Digitized by Google

been altogether sunk in sensual delights—is answered once for all in the incarnate and crucified and ascended Lord, by and in whom all heaven has stooped to earth, that earth might be lifted to heaven. Every child of man, though lonely and earthly, has the ladder-foot by his side,—like the sunbeam, which comes straight into the eyes of every gazer, wherever he stands. It becomes increasingly evident, in the controversies of these days, that there will remain for modern thought only the alternative,—either Jesus Christ is the means of communication between God and man, or there is no communication. Deism and theism are compromises, and cannot live. The cultivated world in both hemispheres is being more and more shut up to either accepting Christ as revealer, by whom alone we know, and as medium by whom alone we love and approach, God; or sinking into abysses of negations where choke-damp will stifle enthusiasm and poetry, as well as devotion and immortal hope.

Jacob's vision was meant to teach him, and is meant to teach us, the nearness of God, and the swift directness of communication, whereby His help comes to us and our desires rise to Him. These and their kindred truths were to be to him, and should be to us, the parents of much nobleness. Here is the secret of elevation of aim and thought above the mean things of sense. We all, and especially the young, in whose veins the blood dances, and to whom life is in all its glory and freshness, are tempted to think of it as all. It does us good to have this vision of the eternal realities blazing in upon us, even if it seems to glare at us, rather than to shine with lambent light. The seen is but a thin veil of the unseen. Earth, which

Digitized by Google

we are too apt to make a workshop, or a mere garden of pleasure, is a Bethel,—a house of God. Everywhere the ladder stands; everywhere the angels go up and down; everywhere the Face looks from the top. Nothing will save life from becoming, sooner or later, trivial, monotonous, and infinitely wearisome, but the continual vision of the present God, and the continual experience of the swift ascent and descent of our aspirations and His blessings.

It is the secret of purity too. How could Jacob indulge in his craft, and foul his conscience with sin, as long as he carried the memory of what he had seen in the solitary night on the uplands of Bethel? The direct result of the vision is the same command as Abraham received, 'Walk before Me, and be thou perfect.' Realise My presence, and let that kill the motions of sin, and quicken to service.

It is also the secret of peace. Hopes and fears, and dim uncertainty of the future, no doubt agitated the sleeper's mind as he laid him down. His independent life was beginning. He had just left his father's tents for the first time; and, though not a youth in years, he was in the position which youth holds with us. So to him, and to all young persons, here is shown the charm which will keep the heart calm, and preserve us from being 'over exquisite to cast the fashion of uncertain evils,' or too eagerly longing for possible good. 'I am with thee' should be enough to steady our souls; and the confidence that God will not leave us till He has accomplished His own purpose for us, should make us willing to let Him do as He will with ours.

2. Notice the imperfect reception of the divine teaching. Jacob's startled exclamation on awakening

Digitized by Google

from his dream indicates a very low level both of religious knowledge and feeling. Nor is there any reason for taking the words in any but their most natural sense; for it is a mistake to ascribe to him the knowledge of God due to later revelation, or, at this stage of his life, any depth of religious emotion. He is alarmed at the thought that God is near. Probably he had been accustomed to think of God's presence as in some special way associated with his father's encampment, and had not risen to the belief of His omnipresence. There seems no joyous leaping up of his heart at the thought that God is here. Dread, not unmingled with the superstitious fear that he had profaned a holy place by laying himself down in it, is his prevailing feeling, and he pleads ignorance as the excuse for his sacrilege. He does not draw the conclusion from the vision that all the earth is hallowed by a near God, but only that he has unwittingly stumbled on His house; and he does not learn that from every place there is an open door for the loving heart into the calm depths where God is throned, but only that *here* he unwittingly stands at the gate of heaven. So he misses the very inner purpose of the vision, and rather shrinks from it than welcomes it. Was that spasm of fear all that passed through his mind that night? Did he sleep again when the glory died out of the heaven? So the story would appear to suggest. But, in any case, we see here the effect of the sudden blazing in upon a heart not yet familiar with the Divine Friend, of the conviction that He is really near. Gracious as God's promise was, it did not dissipate the creeping awe at His presence. It is an eloquent testimony of man's consciousness of sin, that whensoever a present

Digitized by Google

God becomes a reality to a worldly man, he trembles. 'This place' would not be 'dreadful,' but blessed, if it were not for the sense of discord between God and me.

The morning light brought other thoughts, when it filled the silent heavens, and where the ladder had stretched, there was but empty blue. The lesson is sinking into his mind. He lifts the rude stone and pours oil on it, as a symbol of consecration, as nameless races have done all over the world. His vow shows that he had but begun to learn in God's school. He hedges about his promise with a punctilious repetition of God's undertaking, as if resolved that there should be no mistake. Clause by clause he goes over it all, and puts an 'if' to it. God's word should have kindled something liker faith than that. What a fall from 'Abram believed in the Lord, and He counted it to him for righteousness'! Jacob barely believed, and will wait to see whether all will turn out as it has been promised. That is not the glad, swift response of a loving, trusting heart. Nor is he contented with repeating to God the terms of his engagement, but he adds a couple of clauses which strike him as being important, and as having been omitted. There was nothing about 'bread to eat, and raiment to put on,' nor about coming back again 'in peace,' so he adds these. A true 'Jew,'—great at a bargain, and determined to get all he can, and to have no mistake about what he must get before he gives anything! Was Jesus thinking at all of the ancestor when He warned the descendants, in words which sound curiously like an echo of Jacob's, not to be anxious 'what ye shall eat,' nor 'what ye shall put on'? As the vow stands in the Authorised Version, it is farther open to the charge of suspending his worship of God upon the

Digitized by Google

fulfilment of these conditions; but it is better to adopt the marginal rendering of the Revised Version, according to which the clause 'then shall the Lord be my God' is a part of the conditions, not of the vow, and is to be read 'And [if] the Lord will be . . . then this stone . . . shall be,' etc. If this rendering be adopted, as I think it should be, the vow proper is simply of outward service,—he will rear an altar, and he will tithe his substance. Not a very munificent pledge! And where in it is the surrender of the heart? Where is the outgoing of love and gratitude? Where the clasping of the hand of his heavenly Friend with calm rapture of thankful self-yielding, and steadfastness of implicit trust? God did not want Jacob's altar, nor his tenths; He wanted Jacob. But many a weary year and many a sore sorrow have to leave their marks on him before the evil strain is pressed out of his blood; and by the unwearied long-suffering of his patient Friend and Teacher in heaven, the crafty, earthly-minded Jacob 'the supplanter' is turned into 'Israel, the prince with God, in whom is no guile.' The slower the scholar, the more wonderful the forbearance of the Teacher; and the more may we, who are slow scholars too, take heart to believe that He will not be soon angry with us, nor leave us until He has done that which He has spoken to us of.

MAHANAIM: THE TWO CAMPS

'And Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. And when Jacob saw them, he said, This is God's host: and he called the name of that place Mahanaim' (*i.e.* Two camps).—GENESIS xxxii. 1, 2.

THIS vision came at a crisis in Jacob's life. He has just left the house of Laban, his father-in-law, where

Digitized by Google

he had lived for many years, and in company with a long caravan, consisting of wives, children, servants, and all his wealth turned into cattle, is journeying back again to Palestine. His road leads him close by the country of Esau. Jacob was no soldier, and he is naturally terrified to meet his justly incensed brother. And so, as he plods along with his defenceless company trailing behind him, as you may see the Arab caravans streaming over the same uplands to-day, all at once, in the middle of his march, a bright-harnessed army of angels meets him. Whether visible to the eye of sense, or, as would appear, only to the eye of faith, they *are* visible to this troubled man; and, in a glow of confident joy, he calls the name of that place 'Mahanaim,' two camps. One camp was the little one of his down here, with the helpless women and children and his own frightened and defenceless self, and the other was the great one up there, or rather in shadowy but most real spiritual presence around about him, as a bodyguard making an impregnable wall between him and every foe. We may take some very plain and everlastingly true lessons out of this story.

1. First, the angels of God meet us on the dusty road of common life. 'Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him.'

As he was tramping along there, over the lonely fields of Edom, with many a thought on his mind and many a fear at his heart, but feeling 'There is the path that I have to walk on,' all at once the air was filled with the soft rustle of angel wings, and the brightness from the flashing armour of the heavenly hosts flamed across his unexpecting eye. And so it evermore. The true place for us to receive visions of

Digitized by Google

God is in the path of the homely, prosaic duties which He lays upon us. The dusty road is far more likely to be trodden by angel feet than the remote summits of the mountain, where we sometimes would fain go; and many an hour consecrated to devotion has less of the manifest presence of God than is granted to some weary heart in its commonplace struggle with the little troubles and trials of daily life. These make the doors, as it were, by which the visitants draw near to us.

It is the common duties, 'the narrow round, the daily task,' that not only give us 'all we ought to ask,' but are the selected means and channels by which, ever, God's visitants draw near to us. The man that has never seen an angel standing beside him, and driving his loom for him, or helping him at his counter and his desk, and the woman that has never seen an angel, according to the bold realism and homely vision of the old German picture, working with her in the kitchen and preparing the meal for the household, have little chance of meeting such visitants at any other point of their experience or event of their lives.

If the week be empty of the angels, you will never catch sight of a feather of their wings on the Sunday. And if we do not recognise their presence in the midst of all the prose, and the commonplace, and the vulgarity, and the triviality, and the monotony, the dust of the small duties, we shall go up to the summit of Sinai itself and see nothing there but cold grey stone and everlasting snows. 'Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him.' The true field for religion is the field of common life.

And then another side of the same thought is this, that it is in the path where God has bade us walk

Digitized by Google

that we shall find the angels round us. We may meet them, indeed, on paths of our own choosing, but it will be the sort of angel that Balaam met, with a sword in his hand, mighty and beautiful, but wrathful too; and we had better not front him! But the friendly helpers, the emissaries of God's love, the apostles of His grace, do not haunt the roads that we make for ourselves. They confine themselves rigidly to 'the paths in which God has before ordained that we should walk in them.' A man has no right to expect, and he will not get, blessing and help and divine gifts when, self-willedly, he has taken the bit between his teeth, and is choosing his own road in the world. But if he will say, 'Lord! here I am; put me where Thou wilt, and do with me what Thou wilt,' then he may be sure that that path, though it may be solitary of human companionship, and leading up amongst barren rocks and over bare moorlands, where the sun beats down fiercely, will not be unvisited by a better presence, so that in sweet consciousness of sufficiency of rich grace, he will be able to say, 'I, being in the way, the Lord met me.'

2. Still further, we may draw from this incident the lesson that God's angels meet us punctually at the hour of need.

Jacob is drawing nearer and nearer to his fear every step. He is now just on the borders of Esau's country, and close upon opening communications with his brother. At that critical moment, just before the finger of the clock has reached the point on the dial at which the bell would strike, the needed help comes, the angel guards draw near and camp beside him. It is always so. 'The Lord shall help her, and that right early.' His hosts come no sooner and no later than

Digitized by Google

we need. If they appeared before we had realised our danger and our defencelessness, our hearts would not leap up at their coming, as men in a beleaguered town do when the guns of the relieving force are heard booming from afar. Often God's delays seem to us inexplicable, and our prayers to have no more effect than if they were spoken to a sleeping Baal. But such delays are merciful. They help us to the consciousness of our need. They let us feel the presence of the sorrow. They give opportunity of proving the weakness of all other supports. They test and increase desire for His help. They throw us more unreservedly into His arms. They afford room for the sorrow or the burden to work its peaceable fruits. So, and in many other ways, delay of succour fits us to receive succour, and our God makes no tarrying but for our sakes.

It is His way to let us come almost to the edge of the precipice, and then, in the very nick of time, when another minute and we are over, to stretch out His strong right hand and save us. So Peter is left in prison, though prayer is going up unceasingly for him —and no answer comes. The days of the Passover feast slip away, and still he is in prison, and prayer does nothing for him. The last day of his life, according to Herod's purpose, dawns, and all the day the Church lifts up its voice—but apparently there is no answer, nor any that regarded. The night comes, and still the vain cry goes up, and Heaven seems deaf or apathetic. The night wears on, and still no help comes. But in the last watch of that last night, when day is almost dawning, at nearly the last minute when escape would have been possible, the angel touches the sleeping Apostle, and with leisurely calmness, as

Digitized by Google

sure that he had ample time, leads him out to freedom and safety. It was precisely because Jesus loved the household at Bethany that, after receiving the sisters' message, He abode still for two days in the same place where He was. However our impatience may wonder, and our faithlessness venture sometimes almost to rebuke Him when He comes, with words like Mary's and Martha's—'Lord, if Thou hadst been here, such and such sorrows would not have happened, and Thou couldst so easily have been here'—we should learn the lesson that even if He has delayed so long that the dreaded blow has fallen, He has come soon enough to make it the occasion for a still more glorious communication of His power. 'Rest in the Lord,' wait patiently for Him, and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart.'

3. Again, we learn from this incident that the angels of God come in the shape which we need.

Jacob's want at the moment was protection. Therefore the angels appear in warlike guise, and present before the defenceless man another camp, in which he and his unwieldy caravan of women and children and cattle may find security. If his special want had been of some blessing of another kind, no doubt another form of appearance, suited with precision to his need, would have been imposed upon these angel helpers. For God's gifts to us change their character; as the Rabbis fabled that the manna tasted to each man what each most desired. The same pure heavenly bread has the varying savour that commends it to varying palates. God's grace is Protean. It takes all the forms that man's necessities require. As water assumes the shape of any vessel into which it is put, so this great blessing comes to each of us, moulded

Digitized by Google

according to the pressure and taking the form of our circumstances and necessities. His fulness is all-sufficient. It is the same blood that, passing to all the members, ministers to each according to the needs and fashion of each. And it is the same grace which, passing to our souls, in each man is shaped according to his present condition and ministers to his present wants.

So, dear brethren, in that great fulness each of us may have the thing that we need. The angel who to one man is protection, to another shall be teaching and inspiration; to another shall appear with chariots of fire and horses of fire to sweep the rapt soul heavenward; to another shall draw near as a deliverer from his fetters, at whose touch the bonds shall fall from off him; to another shall appear as the instructor in duty and the appointer of a path of service, like that vision that shone in the castle to the Apostle Paul, and said, 'Thou must bear witness for me at Rome'; to another shall appear as opening the door of heaven and letting a flood of light come down upon his darkened heart, as to the Apocalyptic seer in his rocky Patmos. And 'all this worketh that one and the self-same' Lord of angels 'dividing to every man severally as He will,' and as the man needs. The defenceless Jacob has the manifestation of the divine presence in the guise of armed warriors that guard his unwarlike camp.

I add one last word. Long centuries after Jacob's experience at Mahanaim, another trembling fugitive found himself there, fearful, like Jacob, of the vengeance and anger of one who was knit to him by blood. When poor King David was flying from the face of Absalom his son, the first place where he made a

Digitized by Google

stand, and where he remained during the whole of the rebellion, was this town of Mahanaim, away on the eastern side of the Jordan. Do you not think that to the kingly exile, in his feebleness and his fear, the very name of his resting-place would be an omen? Would he not recall the old story, and bethink himself of how round that other frightened man

'Bright-harnessed angels stood in order serviceable';

and would he not, as he looked on his little band of friends, faithful among the faithless, have his eyesight cleared to behold the other camp? Such a vision, no doubt, inspired the calm confidence of the psalm which evidently belongs to that dark hour of his life, and made it possible for the hunted king, with his feeble band, to sing even then, 'I will both lay me down in peace and sleep, for Thou, Lord, makest me dwell in safety, solitary though I am.'

Nor is the vision emptied of its power to stay and make brave by all the ages that have passed. The vision was for a moment; the fact is for ever. The sun's ray was flashed back from celestial armour, 'the next all unreflected shone' on the lonely wastes of the desert—but the host of God was there still. The transitory appearance of the permanent realities is a revelation to us as truly as to the patriarch; and though no angel wings may winnow the air around our road, nor any sworded seraphim be seen on our commonplace march, we too have all the armies of heaven with us, if we tread the path which God has marked out, and in our weakness and trembling commit ourselves to Him. The heavenly warriors die not, and hover around us to-day, excelling in the strength of their immortal youth, and as ready to

Digitized by Google

succour us as they were all these centuries ago to guard the solitary Jacob.

Better still, the 'Captain of the Lord's host' is 'come up' to be our defence, and our faith has not only to behold the many ministering spirits sent forth to minister to us, but One mightier than they, whose commands they all obey, and who Himself is the companion of our solitude and the shield of our defencelessness. It was blessed that Jacob should be met by the many angels of God. It is infinitely more blessed that '*the* Angel of the Lord'—the One who is more than the many—'encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them.'

The postscript of the last letter which Gordon sent from Khartoum closed with the words, 'The hosts are with me—Mahanaim.' Were they not, even though death was near? Was that sublime faith a mistake—the vision an optical delusion? No, for their ranks are arrayed around God's children to keep them from all evil while He wills that they should live, and their chariots of fire and horses of fire are sent to bear them to heaven when He wills that they should die.

THE TWOFOLD WRESTLE—GOD'S WITH JACOB AND JACOB'S WITH GOD

'And Jacob said, O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, the Lord which saidst unto me, Return unto thy country, and to thy kindred, and I will deal well with thee: I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which Thou hast shewed unto Thy servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands. Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau: for I fear him, lest he will come and smite me, and the mother with the children. And Thou saidst, I will surely do thee good, and make thy seed as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'—GENESIS xxxii. 9-12.

JACOB'S subtlety and craft were, as is often the case, the weapons of a timid as well as selfish nature. No

Digitized by Google

wonder, then, that the prospect of meeting his wronged and strong brother threw him into a panic, notwithstanding the vision of the camp of angels by the side of his defenceless caravan of women and children. Esau had received his abject message of propitiation in grim silence, sent no welcome back, but with ominous haste and ambiguous purpose began his march towards him with a strong force. A few hours will decide whether he means revenge. Jacob's fright does not rob him of his ready wit; he goes to work at once to divide his party, so as to ensure safety for half of it. He schemes first, and prays second. The order might have been inverted with advantage, but is like the man—in the lowest phase of his character. His prayer shows that he is beginning to profit by the long years of schooling. Though its burden is only deliverance from Esau, it pleads with God on the grounds of His own command and promise, of Jacob's unworthiness of God's past mercies, and of His firm covenant. A breath of a higher life is stirring in the shifty schemer who has all his life been living by his wits. Now he has come to a point where he knows that his own power can do nothing. With Laban, a man of craft like himself, it was diamond cut diamond; and Jacob was equal to the position. But the wild Bedouin brother, with his four hundred men, is not to be managed so; and Jacob is driven to God by his conscious helplessness. It is the germ, but only the germ, and needs much tending and growth before it matures. The process by which this faint dawning of a better life is broadened into day is begun in the mysterious struggle which forms the main part of this lesson, and is God's answer to his prayer.

Digitized by Google

1. We have, first, the twofold wrestling. The silent night-long wrestle with the 'traveller unknown' is generally regarded as meaning essentially the same thing as the wonderful colloquy which follows. But I venture to take a somewhat different point of view, and to suggest that there are here two well-marked stages. In the first, which is represented as transacted in unbroken silence, 'a man' wrestles with Jacob, and does not prevail; in the second, which is represented as an interchange of speech, Jacob strives with the 'man,' and does prevail. Taken together, the two are a complete mirror, not only of the manner of the transformation of Jacob into Israel, but of universal eternal truths as to God's dealings with us, and our power with Him.

As to the former stage, the language of the narrative is to be noted, 'There wrestled a man with him.' The attack, so to speak, begins with his mysterious antagonist, not with the patriarch. The 'man' seeks to overcome Jacob, not Jacob the man. There, beneath the deep heavens, in the solemn silence of night, which hides earth and reveals heaven, that strange struggle with an unknown Presence is carried on. We have no material for pronouncing on the manner of it, whether ecstasy, vision, or an objective and bodily fact. The body was implicated in the consequences, at all events, and the impression which the story leaves is of an outward struggle. But the purpose of the incident is the same, however the question as to its form be answered. Nor can we pronounce, as some have done, on the other question, of the personality of the silent wrestler. Angel, or 'the angel of the covenant,' who is a transient, and possibly only apparent, manifestation in human form of Him who

Digitized by Google

afterwards became flesh and dwelt among us, or some other supernatural embodiment, for that one purpose, of the divine presence,—any of these hypotheses is consistent with the intentionally reticent text. What it leaves unspoken, we shall wisely leave undetermined. God acts and speaks through 'the man.' That is all we can know or need.

What, then, was the meaning of this struggle? Was it not a revelation to Jacob of what God had been doing with him all his life, and was still doing? Was not that merciful striving of God with him the inmost meaning of all that had befallen him since the far-off day when he had left his father's tents, and had seen the opened heavens, and the ladder, which he had so often forgotten? Were not his disappointments, his successes, and all the swift changes of life, God's attempts to lead him to yield himself up, and bow his will? And was not God striving with him now, in the anxieties which gnawed at his heart, and in his dread of the morrow? Was He not trying to teach him how crime always comes home to roost, with a brood of pains running behind it? Was not the weird duel in the brooding stillness a disclosure, which would more and more possess his soul as the night passed on, of a Presence which in silence strove with him, and only desired to overcome that He might bless? The conception of a Divine manifestation wrestling all night long with a man has been declared 'crude,' 'puerile,' and I know not how many other disparaging adjectives have been applied to it. But is it more unworthy of Him, or derogatory to His nature, than the lifelong pleading and striving with each of us, which He undoubtedly carries on? The idea of a man contending with God has been similarly stigma-

Digitized by Google

tised; but is it more mysterious than that awful power which the human will does possess of setting at naught His counsels and resisting His merciful strivings?

The close of the first stage of the twofold wrestle is marked by the laming of Jacob. The paradox that He, who could not overcome, could yet lame by a touch, is part of the lesson. If His finger could do that, what would the grip of His hand do, if He chose to put out His power? It is not for want of strength that He has not crushed the antagonist, as Jacob would feel, with deepening wonder and awe. What a new light would be thus thrown on all the previous struggle! It was the striving of a power which cared not for a mere outward victory, nor put forth its whole force, lest it should crush him whom it desired to conquer only by his own yielding. As Job says, 'Will He plead against me with His great power?' No; God mercifully restrains His hand, in His merciful striving with men. Desiring to overcome them, He desires not to do so by mere superior power, but by their willing yielding to Him.

That laming of Jacob's thigh represents the weakening of all the life of nature and self which had hitherto been his. He had trusted to his own cunning and quick-wittedness; he had been shrewd, not over-scrupulous, and successful. But he had to learn that 'by strength shall no man prevail,' and to forsake his former weapons. Wrestling with his hands and limbs is not the way to prevail either with God or man. Fighting with God in his own strength, he is only able to thwart God's merciful purpose towards him, but is powerless as a reed in a giant's grasp if God chooses to summon His destructive powers into exercise. So this

Digitized by Google

failure of natural power is the turning-point in the twofold wrestle, and marks as well as symbolises the transition in Jacob's life and character from reliance upon self and craft to reliance upon his divine Antagonist become his Friend. It is the path by which we must all travel if we are to become princes with God. The life of nature and of dependence on self must be broken and lamed in order that, in the very moment of discovered impotence, we may grasp the hand that smites, and find immortal power flowing into our weakness from it.

2. So we come to the second stage, in which Jacob strives with God and does prevail. 'Let me go, for the day breaketh.' Then did the stranger wish to go; and if he did, why could not he, who had lamed his antagonist, loose himself from his grasp? The same explanation applies here which is required in reference to Christ's action to the two disciples at Emmaus: 'He made as though He would have gone further.' In like manner, when He came to them on the water, He appeared as though He 'would have passed by.' In all three cases the principle is the same. God desires to go, if we do not desire Him to stay. He will go, unless we keep Him. Then, at last, Jacob betakes himself to his true weapons. Then, at last, he strangely wishes to keep his apparent foe. He has learned, in some dim fashion, whom he has been resisting, and the blessedness of having Him for friend and companion. So here comes in the account of the whole scene which Hosea gives (Hos. xii. 4): 'He wept, and made supplication unto Him.' That does not describe the earlier portion, but is the true rendering of the later stage, of which our narrative gives a more summary account. The desire to retain God binds

Digitized by Google

Him to us. All His struggling with us has been aimed at evoking it, and all His fulness responds to it when evoked. Prayer is power. It conquers God. We overcome Him when we yield. When we are vanquished, we are victors. When the life of nature is broken within us, then from conscious weakness springs the longing which God cannot but satisfy. 'When I am weak, then am I strong.' As Charles Wesley puts it, in his grand hymn on this incident:—

> 'Yield to me now, for I am weak,
> But confident in self-despair.'

And God prevails when we prevail. His aim in all the process of His mercy has been but to overcome our heavy earthliness and selfishness, which resists His pleading love. His victory is our yielding, and, in that yielding, obtaining power with Him. He delights to be held by the hand of faith, and ever gladly yields to the heart's cry, 'Abide with me.' 'I will not let Thee go, except Thou bless me,' is music to His ear; and our saying so, in earnest, persistent clinging to Him, is His victory as well as ours.

3. We have, next, the new name, which is the prize of Jacob's victory, and the sign of a transformation in his character. Before this time he had been Jacob, the worker with wiles, who supplanted his brother, and met his foes with duplicity and astuteness like their own. He had been mainly of the earth, earthy. But that solemn hour had led him into the presence-chamber, the old craft had been mortally wounded, he had seen some glimpse of God as his friend, whose presence was not 'awful,' as he had thought it long ago, nor enigmatical and threatening, as he had at first deemed it that night, but the fountain

Digitized by Google

of blessing and the one thing needful. A man who has once learned that lesson, though imperfectly, has passed into a purer region, and left behind him his old crookedness. He has learned to pray, not as before, prayers for mere deliverance from Esau and the like, but his whole being has gone out in yearning for the continual nearness of his mysterious antagonist-friend. So, though still the old nature remains, its power is broken, and he is a new creature. Therefore he needs a new name, and gets it from Him who can name men, because He sees the heart's depths, and because He has the right over them. To impose a name is the sign of authority, possession, insight into character. The change of name indicates a new epoch in a life, or a transformation of the inner man. The meaning of 'Israel' is 'He (who) strives with God'; and the reason for its being conferred is more accurately given by the Revised Version, which translates, 'For thou hast striven with God and with men,' than in the Authorised rendering. His victory with God involved the certainty of his power with men. All his life he had been trying to get the advantage of them, and to conquer them, not by spear and sword, but by his brains. But now the true way to true sway among men is opened to him. All men are the servants of the servant and the friend of God. He who has the ear of the emperor is master of many men.

Jacob is not always called Israel in his subsequent history. His new name was a name of character and of spiritual standing, and that might fluctuate, and the old self resume its power; so he is still called by the former appellation, just as, at certain points in his life, the apostle forfeits the right to be 'Peter,' and has to hear from Christ's lips the old name, the

Digitized by Google

use of which is more poignant than many reproachful words: 'Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you.' But in the last death-bed scene, when the patriarch lifted himself in his bed, and with prophetic dignity pronounced his parting benediction on Joseph's sons, the new name reappears with solemn pathos.

That name was transmitted to his descendants, and has passed over to the company of believing men, who have been overcome by God, and have prevailed with God. It is a charter and a promise. It is a stringent reminder of duty and a lofty ideal. A true Christian is an 'Israel.' His office is to wrestle with God. Nor can we forget how this mysterious scene was repeated in yet more solemn fashion, beneath the gnarled olives of Gethsemane, glistening in the light of the paschal full moon, when the true Israel prayed with such sore crying and tears that His body partook of the struggle, and 'His sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.' The word which describes Christ's agony is that which is often rendered 'wrestling,' and perhaps is selected with intentional allusion to this incident. At all events, when we think of Jacob by the brook Jabbok, and of a 'greater than our father Jacob' by the brook Kedron, we may well learn what persistence, what earnestness and effort of the whole nature, go to make up the ideal of prayer, and may well blush for the miserable indifference and torpor of what we venture to call our prayers. These are our patterns, 'as many as walk according to this rule,' and are thereby shown to be 'the Israel of God,'—upon them shall be peace.

4. We have, as the end of all, a deepened desire after closer knowledge of God, and the answer to it. Some

Digitized by Google

expositors (as, for instance, Robertson of Brighton, in his impressive sermon on this section) take the closing petition, 'Tell me, I pray thee, Thy name,' as if it were the centre point of the whole incident. But this is obviously a partial view. The desire to know that name does not come to Jacob, as we might have expected, when he was struggling with his unknown foe in the dark there. It is the end, and, in some sense, the issue, of all that has gone before. Not that he was in any doubt as to the person to whom he spoke; it is just because he knows that he is speaking with God, who alone can bless, that he longs to have some deeper, clearer knowledge still of Him. He is not asking for a word by which he may call Him; the name is the expression of the nature, and his parting request is for something far more intimate and deep than syllables which could be spoken by any lips. The certain sequel of the discovery of God as striving in mercy with a man, and of yielding to him, is the thirst for deeper acquaintance with Him, and for a fuller, more satisfying knowledge of His inmost heart. If the season of mysterious intercourse must cease, and day hide more than it discloses, and Jacob go to face Esau, and we come down from the mount to sordid cares and mean tasks, at least we long to bear with us as a love-token some whisper in our inmost hearts that may cheer us with the peaceful truth about Him and be a hidden sweetness. The presence of such a desire is a sure consequence, and therefore a good test, of real prayer.

The Divine answer, which sounds at first like refusal, is anything but that. Why dost thou ask after My name? surely I need not to give thee more revelation of My character. Thou hast enough of light; what

Digitized by Google

thou needest is insight into what thou hast already. We have in what God has made known of Himself already to us—both in His outward revelation, which is so much larger and sweeter to us than it was to Jacob, but also in His providences, and in the inward communion which we have with Him if we have let Him overcome us, and have gained power to prevail with Him—sources of certain knowledge of Him so abundant and precious that we need nothing but the loving eye which shall take in all their beauty and completeness, to have our most eager desires after His name more than satisfied. We need not ask for more sunshine, but take care to spread ourselves out in the full sunshine which we have, and let it drench our eyes and fire our hearts. 'And He blessed him there.' Not till now was he capable of receiving the full blessing. He needed to have self beaten out of him; he needed to recognise God as lovingly striving with Him; he needed to yield himself up to Him; he needed to have his heart thus cleansed and softened, and then opened wide by panting desire for the presence and benediction of God; he needed to be made conscious of his new standing, and of the higher life budding within him; he needed to experience the yearning for a closer vision of the face, a deeper knowledge of the name,—and then it was possible to pour into his heart a tenderness and fulness of blessing which before there had been no room to receive, and which now answered in sweetest fashion the else unanswered desire, 'Tell me, I pray thee, Thy name.'

In like manner we may each be blessed with the presence and benediction of Him whose merciful strivings, when we knew Him not, came to us in the

Digitized by Google

darkness; and to whom, if we yield, there will be peace and power in our hearts, and upon us, too, the sun will rise as we pass from the place where our foe became our friend, and by faith we saw Him face to face, and drank in life by the gaze.

A FORGOTTEN VOW

'Arise, go up to Beth-el, and dwell there: and make there an altar unto God, that appeared unto thee when thou fleddest from the face of Esau thy brother.'
GENESIS XXXV. 1.

THIRTY years at least had passed since Jacob's vow; ten or twenty since his return. He is in no haste to fulfil it, but has settled down at Shechem and bought land there, and seems to have forgotten all about Bethel.

1. *The lesson of possible negligence.*

(*a*) We are apt to forget vows when God has fulfilled His side of them. Resolutions made in time of trouble are soon forgotten. We pray and think about God more then than when things go well with us. Religion is in many men's judgment for stormy weather only.

(*b*) We are often more resolved to make sacrifices in the beginning of our Christian course than afterwards.

Many a brilliant morning is followed by cloudy day.

Youth is often full of enthusiasms which after-days forget.

2. *The reasons for the negligence.*

Jacob felt a gradual fading away of impressions of need. He was comfortably settled at Shechem. He was surrounded by a wild, godless household who cherished their idols, and he knew that if he went to Bethel idolatry must be given up.

3. *The essentials to communion and service.*

Surrender. Purity. Must bury idols under oak.

Digitized by Google

4. *The reward of sacrifice and of duty discharged.*

The renewed appearance of God. The confirmation of name Israel. Enlarged promises. So the old man's vision may be better than the youth's, if he lives up to his youthful vows.

THE TRIALS AND VISIONS OF DEVOUT YOUTH

'And Jacob dwelt in the land wherein his father was a stranger, in the land of Canaan. These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brethren; and the lad was with the sons of Bilhah, and with the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives: and Joseph brought unto his father their evil report. Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colours. And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him. And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it his brethren: and they hated him yet the more. And he said unto them, Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed: For, behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves stood round about, and made obeisance to my sheaf. And his brethren said to him, Shalt thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have dominion over us? And they hated him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words. And he dreamed yet another dream, and told it his brethren, and said, Behold, I have dreamed a dream more; and behold, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me. And he told it to his father, and to his brethren: and his father rebuked him, and said unto him, What is this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth? And his brethren envied him; but his father observed the saying.'—GENESIS xxxvii. 1-11.

'THE generations of Jacob' are mainly occupied with the history of Joseph, because through him mainly was the divine purpose carried on. Jacob is now the head of the chosen family, since Isaac's death (Gen. xxxv. 29), and therefore the narrative is continued under that new heading. There may possibly be intended a contrast in 'dwelt' and 'sojourned' in verse 1, the former implying a more complete settling down.

There are two principal points in this narrative,—the sad insight that it gives into the state of the household in which so much of the world's history and hopes was wrapped up, and the preludings of Joseph's future in his dreams.

Digitized by Google

As to the former, the account of it is introduced by the statement that Joseph, at seventeen years of age, was set to work, according to the wholesome Eastern usage, and so was thrown into the company of the sons of the two slave-women, Bilhah and Zilpah. Delitzsch understands 'lad' in verse 2 in the sense in which we use 'boy,' as meaning an attendant. Joseph was, then, told off to be subordinate to these two sets of his rough brothers. The relationship was enough to rouse hatred in such coarse souls. And, indeed, the history of Jacob's household strikingly illustrates the miserable evils of polygamy, which makes families within the family, and turns brothers into enemies. Bilhah's and Zilpah's sons reflected in their hatred of Rachel's their mothers' envy of the true wife of Jacob's heart. The sons of the bondwoman were sure to hate the sons of the free.

If Joseph had been like his brothers, they would have forgiven him his mother. But he was horrified at his first glimpse of unrestrained young passions, and, in the excitement of disgust and surprise, 'told their evil report.' No doubt, his brothers had been unwilling enough to be embarrassed by his presence, for there is nothing that wild young men dislike more than the constraint put on them by the presence of an innocent youth; and when they found out that this 'milk-sop' of a brother was a spy and a telltale, their wrath blazed up. So Joseph had early experience of the shock which meets all young men who have been brought up in godly households when they come into contact with sin in fellow-clerks, servants, students, or the like. It is a sharp test of what a young man is made of, to come forth from the shelter of a father's care and a mother's love, and to be forced into witness-

Digitized by Google

ing and hearing such things as go on wherever a number of young men are thrown together. Be not 'partaker of other men's sins.' And the trial is doubly great when the tempters are elder brothers, and the only way to escape their unkindness is to do as they do. Joseph had an early experience of the need of resistance; and, as long as the world is a world, love to God will mean hatred from its worst elements. If we are 'sons of the day,' we cannot but rebuke the darkness.

It is an invidious office to tell other people's evil-doing, and he who brings evil reports of others generally and deservedly gets one for himself. But there are circumstances in which to do so is plain duty, and only a mistaken sense of honour keeps silence. But there must be no exaggeration, malice, or personal ends in the informer. Classmates in school or college, fellow-servants, employees in great businesses, and the like, have not only a duty of loyalty to one another, but of loyalty to their superior. We are sometimes bound to be blind to, and dumb about, our associates' evil deeds, but sometimes silence makes us accomplices.

Jacob had a right to know, and Joseph would have been wrong if he had not told him, the truth about his brothers. Their hatred shows that his purity had made their doing wrong more difficult. It is a grand thing when a young man's presence deprives the Devil of elbow-room for his tricks. How much restraining influence such a one may exert!

Jacob's somewhat foolish love, and still more foolish way of showing it, made matters worse. There were many excuses for him. He naturally clung to the son of his lost but never-forgotten first love, and as naturally found, in Joseph's freedom from the vices of his other sons, a solace and joy. It has been suggested

Digitized by Google

that the 'long garment with sleeves,' in which he decked the lad, indicated an intention of transferring the rights of the first-born to him, but in any case it meant distinguishing affection; and the father or mother who is weak enough to show partiality in the treatment of children need not wonder if their unwise love creates bitter heart-burnings. Perhaps, if Bilhah's and Zilpah's sons had had a little more sunshine of a father's love, they would have borne brighter flowers and sweeter fruit. It is fatal when a child begins to suspect that a parent is not fair.

So these surly brothers, who could not even say 'Peace be to thee!' (the common salutation) when they came across Joseph, had a good deal to say for themselves. It is a sad picture of the internal feuds of the house from which all nations were to be blessed. The Bible does not idealise its characters, but lets us see the seamy side of the tapestry, that we may the more plainly recognise the Mercy which forgives, and the mighty Providence which works through, such imperfect men. But the great lesson for all young people from the picture of Joseph's early days, when his whiteness rebuked the soiled lives of his brothers, as new-fallen snow the grimy cake, hardened and soiled on the streets, is, 'My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not.' Never mind a world's hatred, if you have a father's love. There is one Father who can draw His obedient children into the deepest secrets of His heart without withholding their portion from the most prodigal.

Joseph's dreams are the other principal point in the narrative. The chief incidents of his life turn on dreams,—his own, his fellow-prisoners', Pharaoh's. The narrative recognises them as divinely sent, and

Digitized by Google

no higher form of divine communication appears to have been made to Joseph. He received no new revelations of religious truth. His mission was, not to bring fresh messages from heaven, but to effect the transference of the nation to Egypt. Hence the lower form of the communications made to him.

The meaning of both dreams is the same, but the second goes beyond the first in the grandeur of the emblems, and in the inclusion of the parents in the act of obeisance. Both sets of symbols were drawn from familiar sights. The homeliness of the 'sheaves' is in striking contrast with the grandeur of the 'sun, moon, and stars.' The interpretation of the first is ready to hand, because the sheaves were 'your sheaves' and 'my sheaf.' There was no similar key included in the second, and his brothers do not appear to have caught its meaning. It was Jacob who read it. Probably Rachel was dead when the dream came, but that need not make a difficulty.

Note that Joseph did not tell his dreams with elation, or with a notion that they meant anything particular. It is plainly the singularity of them that makes him repeat them, as is clearly indicated by the repeated 'behold' in his two reports. With perfect innocence of intention, and as he would have told any other strange dream, the lad repeats them. The commentary was the work of his brothers, who were ready to find proofs of his being put above them, and of his wish to humiliate them, in anything he said or did. They were wiser than he was. Perhaps they suspected that Jacob meant to set him at the head of the clan on his decease, and that the dreams were trumped up and told to them to prepare them for the decision which the special costume may have already hinted.

Digitized by Google

At all events, hatred is very suspicious, and ready to prick up its ears at every syllable that seems to speak of the advancement of its object.

There is a world of contempt, rage, and fear in the questions, 'Shalt thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have dominion over us?' The conviction that Joseph was marked out by God for a high position seems to have entered these rough souls, and to have been fuel to fire. Hatred and envy make a perilous mixture. Any sin can come from a heart drenched with these. Jacob seems to have been wise enough to make light of the dreams to the lad, though much of them in his heart. Youthful visions of coming greatness are often best discouraged. The surest way to secure their fulfilment is to fill the present with strenuous, humble work. 'Do the duty that is nearest thee.' 'The true apprenticeship for a ruler is to serve.' 'Act, act, in the living present.' The sheaves may come to bow down some day, but 'my sheaf' has to be cut and bound first, and the sooner the sickle is among the corn, the better.

But yet, on the other hand, let young hearts be true to their early visions, whether they say much about them or not. Probably it will be wisest to keep silence. But there shine out to many young men and women, at their start in life, bright possibilities of no ignoble sort, and rising higher than personal ambition, which it is the misery and sin of many to see 'fade away into the light of common day,' or into the darkness of night. Be not 'disobedient to the heavenly vision'; for the dreams of youth are often the prophecies of what God means and makes it possible for the dreamer to be, if he wakes to work towards that fair thing which shone on him from afar.

Digitized by Google

MAN'S PASSIONS AND GOD'S PURPOSE

'And it came to pass, when Joseph was come unto his brethren, that they stript Joseph out of his coat, his coat of many colours that was on him; And they took him, and cast him into a pit: and the pit was empty, there was no water in it. And they sat down to eat bread: and they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a company of Ishmeelites came from Gilead with their camels bearing spicery and balm and myrrh, going to carry it down to Egypt. And Judah said unto his brethren, What profit is it if we slay our brother, and conceal his blood? Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmeelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he is our brother and our flesh. And his brethren were content. Then there passed by Midianites merchantmen; and they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmeelites for twenty pieces of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt. And Reuben returned unto the pit; and, behold, Joseph was not in the pit; and he rent his clothes. And he returned unto his brethren, and said, The child is not; and I, whither shall I go? And they took Joseph's coat, and killed a kid of the goats, and dipped the coat in the blood; And they sent the coat of many colours, and they brought it to their father; and said, This have we found: know now whether it be thy son's coat or no. And he knew it, and said, It is my son's coat; an evil beast hath devoured him; Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces. And Jacob rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; and he said, For I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning. Thus his father wept for him. And the Midianites sold him into Egypt unto Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's and captain of the guard.'—GENESIS XXXVII. 23-36.

WE have left the serene and lofty atmosphere of communion and saintship far above us. This narrative takes us down into foul depths. It is a hideous story of vulgar hatred and cruelty. God's name is never mentioned in it; and he is as far from the actors' thoughts as from the writer's words. The crime of the brothers is the subject, and the picture is painted in dark tones to teach large truths about sin.

1. The broad teaching of the whole story, which is ever being reiterated in Old Testament incidents, is that God works out His great purposes through even the crimes of unconscious men. There is an irony, if we may so say, in making the hatred of these men the very means of their brother's advancement, and the occasion of blessing to themselves. As coral insects work, not knowing the plan of their reef, still less the fair vegetation and smiling homes

Digitized by Google

which it will one day carry, but blindly building from the material supplied by the ocean a barrier against it; so even evil-doers are carrying on God's plan, and sin is made to counterwork itself, and be the black channel through which the flashing water of life pours. Joseph's words (Gen. l. 20) give the point of view for the whole story: 'Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good . . . to save much people alive.' We can scarcely forget the still more wonderful example of the same thing, in the crime of crimes, when his brethren slew the Son of God —like Joseph, the victim of envy—and, by their crime, God's counsel of mercy for them and for all was fulfilled.

2. Following the narrative, verses 23, 24, and 25 show us the poisonous fruit of brotherly hatred. The family, not the nation, is the social unit in Genesis. From the beginning, we find the field on which sin works is the family relation. Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, and now the other children of Jacob and Joseph, attest the power of sin when it enters there, and illustrate the principle that the corruption of the best is the worst. The children of Rachel could not but be hated by the children of other mothers. Jacob's undisguised partiality for Joseph was a fault too, which wrought like yeast on the passions of his wild sons. The long-sleeved garment which he gave to the lad probably meant to indicate his purpose to bestow on him the right of the first-born forfeited by Reuben, and so the violent rage which it excited was not altogether baseless. The whole miserable household strife teaches the rottenness of the polygamous relation on which it rested, and the folly of paternal favouritism. So it carries

Digitized by Google

teaching especially needed then, but not out of date now.

The swift passage of the purely inward sin of jealous envy into the murderous act, as soon as opportunity offered, teaches the short path which connects the inmost passions with the grossest outward deeds. Like Jonah's gourd, the smallest seed of hate needs but an hour or two of favouring weather to become a great tree, with all obscene and blood-seeking birds croaking in its branches. 'Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer.' Therefore the solemn need for guarding the heart from the beginnings of envy, and for walking in love.

The clumsy contrivance for murder without criminality, which Reuben suggested, is an instance of the shallow pretexts with which the sophistry of sin fools men before they have done the wrong thing. Sin's mask is generally dropped very soon after. The bait is useless when the hook is well in the fish's gills. 'Don't let us kill him. Let us put him into a cistern. He cannot climb up its bottle-shaped, smooth sides. But that is not our fault. Nobody will ever hear his muffled cries from its depths. But there will be no blood on our hands.' It was not the first time, nor is it the last, that men have tried to blink their responsibility for the consequences which they hoped would come of their crimes. Such excuses seem sound when we are being tempted; but, as soon as the rush of passion is past, they are found to be worthless. Like some cheap castings, they are only meant to be seen in front, where they are rounded and burnished. Get behind them, and you find them hollow.

'They sat down to eat bread.' Thomas Fuller pithily says: 'With what heart could they say grace, either

Digitized by Google

before or after meat?' What a grim meal! And what an indication of their rude natures, seared consciences, and deadened affections!

This picture of the moral condition of the fathers of the Jewish tribes is surely a strong argument for the historical accuracy of the narrative. It would be strange if the legends of a race, instead of glorifying, should blacken, the characters of its founders. No motive can be alleged which would explain such a picture; its only explanation is its truth. The ugly story, too, throws vivid light on that thought, which prophets ever reiterated, 'not for your sakes, but for My name's sake.' The divine choice of Israel was grounded, not on merit, but on sovereign purpose. And the undisguised plainness of the narrative of their sins is but of a piece with the tone of Scripture throughout. It never palliates the faults even of its best men. It tells its story without comment. It never indulges in condemnation any more than in praise. It is a perfect mirror; its office is to record, not to criticise. Many misconceptions of Old Testament morality would have been avoided by keeping that simple fact in view.

3. The ill-omened meal is interrupted by the sudden appearance, so picturesquely described, of the caravan of Ishmaelites with their loaded camels. Dothan was on or near the great trade route to Egypt, where luxury, and especially the custom of embalming, opened a profitable market for spices. The traders would probably not be particular as to the sort of merchandise they picked up on their road, and such an 'unconsidered trifle' as a slave or two would be neither here nor there. This opportune advent of the caravan sets a thought buzzing in Judah's brain, which brings out

Digitized by Google

a new phase of the crime. Hatred darkening to murder is bad enough; but hatred which has also an eye to business, and makes a profit out of a brother, is a shade or two blacker, because it means cold-blooded calculation and selfish advantage instead of raging passion. Judah's cynical question avows the real motive of his intervention. He prefers the paltry gain from selling Joseph to the unprofitable luxury of killing him. It brings in regard to brotherly ties at the end, as a kind of homage paid to propriety, as if the obligations they involved were not broken as really by his proposal as by murder. Certainly it is strange logic which can say in one breath, 'Let us sell him; . . . for he is our brother,' and finds the clause between buffer enough to keep these two contradictories from collision.

If any touch of conscience made the brothers prefer the less cruel alternative, one can only see here another illustration of the strange power which men have of limiting the working of conscience, and of the fact that when a greater sin has been resolved on, a smaller one gets to look almost like a virtue. Perhaps Judah and the rest actually thought themselves very kind and brotherly when they put their brother into strangers' power, and so went back to their meal with renewed cheerfulness, both because they had gained their end without bloodshed, and because they had got the money. They did not think that every tear and pang which Joseph would shed and feel would be laid at their door.

We do not suppose that Joseph was meant to be, in the accurate sense of the word, a type of Christ. But the coincidence is not to be passed by, that these same powerful motives of envy and of greed were combined

Digitized by Google

in His case too, and that there again a Judah (Judas) appears as the agent of the perfidy.

We may note that the appearance of the traders in the nick of time, suggesting the sale of Joseph, points the familiar lesson that the opportunity to do ill deeds often makes ill deeds done. The path for entering on evil is made fatally easy at first; that gate always stands wide. The Devil knows how to time his approaches. A weak nature, with an evil bias in it, finds everywhere occasions and suggestions to do wrong. But it is the evil nature which makes innocent things opportunities for evil. Therefore we have to be on our guard, as knowing that if we fall it is not circumstances, but ourselves, that made stumbling-blocks out of what might have been stepping-stones.

4. Leaving Joseph to pursue his sad journey, our narrative introduces for the first time Reuben, whose counsel, as the verses before the text tell us, it had been to cast the poor lad into the cistern. His motive had been altogether good; he wished to save life, and as soon as the others were out of the way, to bring Joseph up again and get him safely back to Jacob. In chapter xlii. 22, Reuben himself reminds his brothers of what had passed. There he says that he had besought them not to 'sin against the child,' which naturally implies that he had wished them to do nothing to him, and that they 'would not hear.' In the verses before the text he proposes the compromise of the pit, and the others 'hear.' So there seem to have been two efforts made by him—first, to shield Joseph from any harm, and then that half-and-half measure which was adopted. He is absent, while they carry out the plan, and from the cruel merriment of

Digitized by Google

the feast—perhaps watching his opportunity to rescue, perhaps in sickness of heart and protest against the deed. Well meant and kindly motived as his action was—and self-sacrificing too, if, as is probable, Joseph was meant by Jacob as his successor in the forfeited birthright—his scheme breaks down, as attempts to mitigate evil by compliance and to make compromises with sinners usually do. The only one of the whole family who had some virtue in him, was too timid to take up a position of uncompromising condemnation. He thought it more polite to go part of the way, and to trust to being able to prevent the worst. That is always a dangerous experiment. It is often tried still; it never answers. Let a man stand to his guns, and speak out the condemnation that is in his heart; otherwise, he will be sure to go farther than he meant, he will lose all right of remonstrance, and will generally find that the more daring sinners have made his well-meant schemes to avert the mischief impossible.

5. The cruel trick by which Jacob was deceived is perhaps the most heartless bit of the whole heartless crime. It came as near an insult as possible. It was maliciously meant. The snarl about the coat, the studied use of 'thy son,' as if the brothers disowned the brotherhood, the unfeeling harshness of choosing such a way of telling their lie—all were meant to give the maximum of pain, and betray their savage hatred of father and son, and its causes. Was Reuben's mouth shut all this time? Evidently. From his language in chapter xlii., 'His blood is required,' he seems to have believed until then that Joseph had been killed in his absence. But he dared not speak. Had he told what he did know, the brothers had but to add, 'And he proposed it himself,' and his protestations of his good

Digitized by Google

intentions would have been unheeded. He believed his brother dead, and perhaps thought it better that Jacob should think him slain by wild beasts than by brothers' hands, as Reuben supposed him to be. But his shut mouth teaches again how dangerous his policy had been, and how the only road, which it is safe, in view of the uncertainties of the future, to take, is the plain road of resistance to evil and non-fellowship with its doers.

6. And what of the poor old father? His grief is unworthy of God's wrestler. It is not the part of a devout believer in God's providence to refuse to be comforted. There was no religious submission in his passionate sorrow. How unlike the quiet resignation which should have marked the recognition that the God who had been his guide was working here too! No doubt the hypocritical condolences of his children were as vinegar upon nitre. No doubt the loss of Joseph had taken away the one gentle and true son on whom his loneliness rested since his Rachel's death, while he found no solace in the wild, passionate men who called him 'father,' and brought him no 'honour.' But still his grief is beyond the measure which a true faith in God would have warranted; and we cannot but see that the dark picture which we have just been looking at gets no lighter or brighter tints from the demeanour of Jacob.

There are few bitterer sorrows than for a parent to see the children of his own sin in the sins of his children. Jacob might have felt that bitterness, as he looked round on the lovelessness and dark, passionate selfishness of his children, and remembered his own early crimes against Esau. He might have seen that his unwise fondness for the son of his Rachel had led

Digitized by Google

to the brothers' hatred, though he did not know that that hatred had plunged the arrow into his soul. Whether he knew it or not, his own conduct had feathered the arrow. He was drinking as he had brewed; and the heart-broken grief which darkened his later years had sprung from seed of his own sowing. So it is always. 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.'

It is a miserable story of ignoble jealousy and cruel hate; and yet, over all this foaming torrent, God's steadfast bow of peace shines. These crimes and this 'affliction of Joseph' were the direct path to the fulfilment of His purposes. As blind instruments, even in their rebellion and sin, men work out His designs. The lesson of Joseph's bondage will one day be the summing up of the world's history. 'Thou makest the wrath of man to praise Thee: and with the remainder thereof Thou girdest Thyself.'

GOODNESS IN A DUNGEON

'And Joseph's master took him, and put him into the prison, a place where the king's prisoners were bound: and he was there in the prison. But the Lord was with Joseph, and shewed him mercy, and gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners that were in the prison; and whatsoever they did there, he was the doer of it. The keeper of the prison looked not to any thing that was under his hand; because the Lord was with him, and that which he did, the Lord made it to prosper.'—GENESIS xxxix. 20-23.

'And it came to pass after these things, that the butler of the king of Egypt and his baker had offended their lord the king of Egypt. And Pharaoh was wroth against two of his officers, against the chief of the butlers, and against the chief of the bakers. And he put them in ward in the house of the captain of the guard, into the prison, the place where Joseph was bound. And the captain of the guard charged Joseph with them, and he served them: and they continued a season in ward. And they dreamed a dream both of them, each man his dream in one night, each man according to the interpretation of his dream, the butler and the baker of the king of Egypt, which were bound in the prison. And Joseph came in unto them in the morning, and looked upon them, and, behold, they were sad. And he asked Pharaoh's officers that were with him in the ward of his lord's house, saying, Wherefore look ye so sadly to day? And they said unto him, We have dreamed a dream, and there is no interpreter of it. And Joseph said unto them, Do not interpretations belong to God? tell me them, I pray you. And the chief butler told his

Digitized by Google

dream to Joseph, and said to him, In my dream, behold, a vine was before me; And in the vine were three branches: and it was as though it budded, and her blossoms shot forth; and the clusters thereof brought forth ripe grapes: And Pharaoh's cup was in my hand: and I took the grapes, and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and I gave the cup into Pharaoh's hand. And Joseph said unto him, This is the interpretation of it: The three branches are three days: Yet within three days shall Pharaoh lift up thine head, and restore thee unto thy place: and thou shalt deliver Pharaoh's cup into his hand, after the former manner when thou wast his butler. But think on me when it shall be well with thee, and shew kindness, I pray thee, unto me, and make mention of me unto Pharaoh, and bring me out of this house: For indeed I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews: and here also have I done nothing that they should put me into the dungeon.'—GENESIS xl. 1-15.

POTIPHAR was 'captain of the guard,' or, as the title literally runs, chief of the executioners. In that capacity he had charge of the prison, which was connected with his house (Gen. xl. 3). It is, therefore, quite intelligible that he should have put Joseph in confinement on his own authority, and the distinction drawn between such a prisoner and the 'king's prisoners,' who were there by royal warrant or due process of law, is natural. Such high-handed treatment of a slave was a small matter, and it was merciful as well as arrogant, for death would have been the punishment of the crime of which Joseph was accused. Either Potiphar was singularly lenient, or, as is perhaps more probable, he did not quite believe his wife's story, and thought it best to hush up a scandal. The transfer of Joseph from the house to the adjoining prison would be quietly managed, and then no more need be said about an ugly business.

So now we see him at the lowest ebb of his fortunes, flung down in a moment by a lie from the height to which he had slowly been climbing, having lost the confidence of his master, and earned the unslumbering hatred of a wicked woman. He had wrecked his career by his goodness. 'What a fool!' says the world. 'How badly managed things are in this life,' say doubters, 'that virtue should not be

Digitized by Google

paid by prosperity!' But the end, even the nearer end in this life, will show whether he was a fool, and whether things are so badly arranged; and the lesson enforced by the picture of Joseph in his dungeon, and which young beginners in life have special need to learn, is that, come what will of it, right is right, and sin is sin, that consequences are never to deter from duty, and that it is better to have a clean conscience and be in prison than do wickedness and sit at a king's table. A very threadbare lesson, but needing to be often repeated.

'But the Lord was with Joseph.' That is one of the eloquent 'buts' of Scripture. The prison is light when God is there, and chains do not chafe if He wraps His love round them. Many a prisoner for God since Joseph's time has had his experience repeated, and received tenderer tokens from Him in a dungeon than ever before. Paul the prisoner, John in Patmos, Bunyan in Bedford jail, George Fox in Lancaster Castle, Rutherford in Aberdeen, and many more, have found the Lord with them, and showing them His kindness. We may all be sure that, if ever faithfulness to conscience involves us in difficulties, the faithfulness and the difficulties will combine to bring to us sweet and strong tokens of God's approval and presence, the winning of which will make a prison a palace and a gate of heaven.

Joseph's relations to jailer and fellow-prisoners are beautiful and instructive. The former is called 'the keeper of the prison,' and is evidently Potiphar's deputy, in more immediate charge of the prison. Of course, the great man had an underling to do the work, and probably that underling was not chosen for sweetness of temper or facile leniency to his

Digitized by Google

charges. But he fell under the charm of Joseph's character—all the more readily, perhaps, because his occupation had not brought many good men to his knowledge. This jewel would flash all the more brightly for the dark background of criminals, and the jailer would wonder at a type of character so unlike what he was accustomed to. Eastern prisons to-day present a curious mixture of cruelty and companionship. The jailers are on intimate terms with prisoners, and yet are ready to torture them. There is no discipline, nor any rules, nor inspection. The jailer does as he likes. So it seems to have been in Egypt, and there would be nothing unnatural in making a prisoner jailer of the rest, and leaving everything in his hands. The 'keeper of the prison' was lazy, like most of us, and very glad to shift duties on to any capable shoulders. Such a thing would, of course, be impossible with us, but it is a bit of true local colouring here.

Joseph won hearts because God was with him, as the story is careful to point out. Our religion should recommend us, and therefore itself, to those who have to do with us. It is not enough that we should be severely righteous, as Joseph had been, or ready to meet trouble with stoical resignation, but we are to be gentle and lovable, gracious towards men, because we receive grace from God. We owe it to our Lord and to our fellows, and to ourselves, to be magnets to attract to Jesus, by showing how fair He can make a life. Joseph in prison found work to do, and he did not shirk it. He might have said to himself: 'This is poor work for me, who had all Potiphar's house to rule. Shall such a man as I come down to such small tasks as this?' He might

Digitized by Google

have sulked or desponded in idleness, but he took the kind of work that offered, and did his best by it. Many young people nowadays do nothing, because they think themselves above the small humdrum duties that lie near them. It would do some of us good to remember Joseph in the jail, and his cheerful discharge of what his hands found to do there.

Of course, work done 'because the Lord was with him,' in the consciousness of His presence, and in obedience to Him, went well. 'The Lord made it to prosper,' as He always will make such work.

> 'When thou dost favour any action,
> It runs, it flies.'

And even if, sometimes, work done in the fear of the Lord does not outwardly prosper, it does so in deepest truth, if it work in us the peaceable fruit of righteousness. We need to have a more Christian idea of what constitutes prosperity, and then we shall understand that there are no exceptions to the law that, if a man does his work by God and with God and for God, 'that which he does, the Lord makes it to prosper.'

The help that Joseph gave by interpreting the two high officials' dreams cannot be considered here in detail, but we note that the names of similar officers, evidently higher in rank than we should suppose, with our notions of bakers and butlers, are found in Egyptian documents, and that these two were 'king's prisoners,' and put in charge of Potiphar, who alleviated their imprisonment by detailing Joseph as their attendant, thus showing that his feeling to the young Hebrew was friendly still. Dreams are the usual method of divine communication in Genesis,

Digitized by Google

and belong to a certain stage in the process of revelation. The friend of God, who is in touch with Him, can interpret these. 'The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him,' and it is still true that they who live close by God have insight into His purposes. Joseph showed sympathy with the two dreamers, and his question, 'Why look ye so sadly?' unlocked their hearts. He was not so swallowed up in his own trouble as to be blind to the signs of another's sorrow, or slow to try to comfort. Grief is apt to make us selfish, but it is meant to make us tender of heart and quick of hand to help our fellows in calamity. We win comfort for our own sorrows by trying to soothe those of others. Jesus stooped to suffer that He might succour them that suffer, and we are to tread in His steps.

JOSEPH, THE PRIME MINISTER

'And Pharaoh said unto his servants, Can we find such a one as this is, a man in whom the Spirit of God is? And Pharaoh said unto Joseph, Forasmuch as God hath shewed thee all this, there is none so discreet and wise as thou art: Thou shalt be over my house, and according unto thy word shall all my people be ruled: only in the throne will I be greater than thou. And Pharaoh said unto Joseph, See, I have set thee over all the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh took off his ring from his hand, and put it upon Joseph's hand, and arrayed him in vestures of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck; And he made him to ride in the second chariot which he had; and they cried before him, Bow the knee: and he made him ruler over all the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh said unto Joseph, I am Pharaoh, and without thee shall no man lift up his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphnath-paaneah; and he gave him to wife Asenath the daughter of Poti-pherah priest of On. And Joseph went out over all the land of Egypt. And Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh, and went throughout all the land of Egypt. And in the seven plenteous years the earth brought forth by handfuls. And he gathered up all the food of the seven years, which were in the land of Egypt, and laid up the food in the cities: the food of the field, which was round about every city, laid he up in the same.'

GENESIS xli. 38-48.

AT seventeen years of age Joseph was sold for a slave; at thirty he was prime minister of Egypt (Gen. xxxvii. 2; xli. 46). How long his prison life lasted is uncer-

Digitized by Google

tain; but it was long enough for the promises contained in his early dreams to 'try him' (Ps. cv. 19) whether his faith would stand apparent disappointment and weary delay. Like all the Scripture narratives, this history of Joseph has little to say about feelings, and prefers facts. But we can read between the lines, and be tolerably sure that the thirteen years of trial were well endured, and that the inward life had grown so as to fit him for his advancement. We have here a full-length portrait of the prime minister, or vizier, which brings out three points—his elevation, his naturalisation, and his administration.

Joseph had not only interpreted Pharaoh's dream, but had suggested a policy in preparation for the coming famine. He had recommended the appointment of 'a wise and discreet man,' with supreme authority over the land. Pharaoh first consulted 'his servants,' and, with their consent, possibly not very hearty, appointed the proposer of the plan as its carrier-out, quoting to him his own words, 'wise and discreet.'

The sudden installing of an unknown prisoner in high office has often been thought hard to believe, and has been pointed to as proof of the legendary character of the story. But the ground on which Pharaoh put it goes far to explain it. He and his servants had come to believe that 'God' spoke through this man, that 'the Spirit of God' was in him. So here was a divinely sent messenger, whom it would be impiety and madness to reject. Observe that Pharaoh and Joseph both speak in this chapter of 'God.' There was a common ground of recognition of a divine Being on which they met. The local colour of the story indicates a period before the fuller

Digitized by Google

revelation, which drew so broad a line of demarcation between Israel and the other nations.

Joseph's sudden promotion is made the more intelligible by the probability which the study of Egyptian history has given, that the Pharaoh who made him his second in command was one of the Hyksos conquerors who dominated Egypt for a long period. They would have no prejudices against Joseph on account of his being a foreigner. A dynasty of alien conquerors has generally an open door for talent, and cares little who a man's father is, or where he comes from, if he can do his work. And Joseph, by not being an Egyptian born, would be all the fitter an instrument for carrying out the policy which he had suggested.

His ceremonial investiture with the insignia of office is true to Egyptian manners. The signet ring, as the emblem of full authority; the chain, as a mark of dignity; the robe of 'fine linen' (or rather of cotton), which was a priestly dress—all are illustrated by the monuments. The proclamation made before him as he rode in the second chariot has been very variously interpreted. It has been taken for a Hebraised Egyptian word, meaning 'Cast thyself down'; and this interpretation was deemed the most probable, until Assyrian discovery brought to light 'that *abarakku* is the Assyrian name of the grand vizier' (Fr. Delitzsch, *Hebrew Language Viewed in the Light of Assyrian Research*, p. 26). Sayce proposes another explanation, also from the cuneiform tablets: 'There was a word *abrik* in the Sumerian language, which signified a seer, and was borrowed by the Semitic Babylonians under the varying forms of *abrikku* and *abarakku*. It is *abrikku* which we have in Genesis, and the title

Digitized by Google

applied by the people to the "seer" Joseph proves to be the one we should most naturally expect.' The Tel el-Amarna tablets show that the knowledge of cuneiform writing was common in Egypt (Sayce, *Higher Criticism and the Monuments*, p. 214). This explanation is tempting, but it is perhaps scarcely probable that the proclamation should have been in any other language than Egyptian, or should have had reference to anything but Joseph's new office. It was not as seer that he was to be obeyed, but as Pharaoh's representative, even though he had become the latter because he had proved himself the former.

But in any case, the whole context is accurately and strongly Egyptian. Was there any point in the history of Israel, down to an impossibly late date, except the time of Moses, at which Jewish writers were so familiar with Egypt as to have been capable of producing so true a picture?

The lessons of this incident are plain. First stands out, clear and full, the witness it bears to God's faithfulness, and to His sovereign sway over all events. What are all the persons concerned in the narrative but unconscious instruments of His? The fierce brothers, the unconcerned slave-dealers, Potiphar, his wife, the prisoners, Pharaoh, are so many links in a chain; but they are also men, and therefore free to act, and guilty if acting wrongly. Men execute God's purposes, even when unconscious or rebellious, but are responsible, and often punished, for the acts which He uses to effect His designs.

Joseph's thirteen years of trial, crowned with sudden prosperity, may read all of us, and especially young men and women, a lesson of patience. Many

Digitized by Google

of us have to fight our way through analogous difficulties at the outset of our career; and we are apt to lose heart and get restive when success seems slow to come, and one hindrance after another blocks our road. But hindrances are helps. If one of Joseph's misfortunes had been omitted, his good fortune would never have come. If his brethren had not hated him, if he had not been sold, if he had not been imprisoned, he would never have ruled Egypt. Not one thread in the tapestry could have been withdrawn without spoiling the pattern. We cannot afford to lose one of our sorrows or trials. There would be no summer unless winter had gone before. There is a bud or a fruit for every snowflake, and a bird's song for every howl of the storm.

Plainly, too, does the story read the lesson of quiet doing of the work and accepting the circumstances of the moment. Joseph was being prepared for the administration of a kingdom by his oversight of Potiphar's house and of the prison. His character was matured by his trials, as iron is consolidated by heavy hammers. To resist temptation, to do modestly and sedulously whatever work comes to our hands, to be content to look after a jail even though we have dreamed of sun and moon bowing down to us, is the best apprenticeship for whatever elevation circumstances—or, to speak more devoutly, God—intends for us. Young men thrown into city life far away from their homes, and whispered to by many seducing voices, have often to suffer for keeping themselves unspotted; but they are being strengthened by rough discipline, and will get such promotion, in due time, as is good for them. But outward success is not God's best gift. It was better to be the Joseph

Digitized by Google

who deserved his high place, than to have the place. The character which he had grown into was more than the trappings which Pharaoh put on him. And such a character is always the reward of such patience, faith, and self-control, whether chains and chariots are added or not.

Little need be said about the other points of the story. Joseph's naturalisation as an Egyptian was complete. His name was changed, in token that he had completely become a subject of Pharaoh's. The meaning of the formidable-looking polysyllable, which Egyptian lips found easier than 'Joseph,' is uncertain. 'At present the origin of the first syllable is still doubtful, and though the latter part of the name is certainly the Egyptian *n-ti-pa-ankh* ("of the life"), it is difficult to say in which of its different senses the expression *pa-ankh* ("the life") is employed' (Sayce, *ut supra*, p. 213). The prevailing opinion of Egyptian experts is that it means 'Support of life.'

The naturalising was completed by his marriage to Asenath (supposed to mean 'One belonging to the goddess Neith'), a daughter of a high officer of state, Poti-phera (meaning, like its shortened form, Potiphar, 'The gift of Ra' the sun-god). Such an alliance placed him at once in the very innermost circle of Egyptian aristocracy. It may have been a bitter pill for the priest to swallow, to give his daughter to a man of yesterday, and an alien; but, just as probably, he too looked to Joseph with some kind of awe, and was not unwilling to wed Asenath to the first man in the empire, wherever he had started up from.

But should not Joseph's religion have barred such a marriage? The narrator gives no judgment on the fact, and we have to form our own estimate. But

Digitized by Google

it is not to be estimated as if it had occurred five or six centuries later. The family of Jacob was not so fenced off, nor was its treasure of revelation so complete, as afterwards. We may be fairly sure that Joseph felt no inconsistency between his ancestral faith, which had become his own in his trials, and this union. He was risking a great deal; that is certain. Whether the venture ended well or ill, we know not. Only we may be very sure that a marriage in which a common faith is not a strong bond of union lacks its highest sanctity, and is perilously apt to find that difference in religious convictions is a strong separator.

Joseph's administration opens up questions as to Egyptian land tenure, and the like, which cannot be dealt with here. 'In the earlier days of the monarchy the country was in the hands of great feudal lords; . . . the land belonged to them absolutely. . . . But after the convulsion caused by the Hyksos conquest and the war of independence, this older system of land tenure was completely changed. . . . The Pharaoh is the fountain head, not only of honour, but of property as well. . . . The people ceased to have any rights of their own' (Sayce, *ut supra*, p. 216).

We may note Joseph's immediate entrance upon office and his characteristic energy in it. He 'went out from the presence of Pharaoh, and went throughout all the land of Egypt.' No grass grew under this man's feet. He was ubiquitous, personally overseeing everything for seven long years. Wasteful consumption of the abundant crops had to be restrained, storehouses to be built, careful records of the contents to be made, after Egyptian fashion. The people, who could not look so far as seven years ahead, and wanted

Digitized by Google

to enjoy, or make money out of, the good harvests, had to be looked after, and an army of officials to be kept in order. Dignity meant work for him. Like all true men, he thought more of his duty than of his honours. Depend on it, he did not wear his fine clothes or ride in the second chariot, when he was hurrying about the country at his task.

He had come 'out of prison to reign,' and, as we all find, if we are God's servants, to reign means to serve, and the higher the place the harder the task. The long years of waiting had nourished powers which the seven years of busy toil tested. We must make ourselves, by God's help, ready, in obscurity, and especially in youth, for whatever may be laid on us in after days. And if we understand what life here means, we shall be more covetous of spheres of diligent service than of places of shining dignity. Whatever our task, let us do it, as Joseph did his, with strenuous concentration, knowing, as he did, that the years in which it is possible are but few at the longest.

RECOGNITION AND RECONCILIATION

'Then Joseph could not refrain himself before all them that stood by him; and he cried, Cause every man to go out from me. And there stood no man with him, while Joseph made himself known unto his brethren. And he wept aloud: and the Egyptians and the house of Pharaoh heard. And Joseph said unto his brethren, I am Joseph; doth my father yet live? And his brethren could not answer him; for they were troubled at his presence. And Joseph said unto his brethren, Come near to me, I pray you. And they came near. And he said, I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt. Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life. For these two years hath the famine been in the land: and yet there are five years, in the which there shall neither be earing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God: and He hath made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt. Haste ye, and go up to my father, and say unto him, Thus saith thy son Joseph, God hath made me lord of all Egypt: come down unto me, tarry not: And thou shalt dwell in the land of Goshen, and thou shalt be near unto me, thou, and thy children, and thy children's children, and thy flocks, and thy herds, and all that thou hast: And there will I nourish thee; for

Digitized by Google

yet there are five years of famine; lest thou, and thy household, and all that thou hast, come to poverty. And, behold, your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin, that it is my mouth that speaketh unto you. And ye shall tell my father of all my glory in Egypt, and of all that ye have seen; and ye shall haste and bring down my father hither. And he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck, and wept; and Benjamin wept upon his neck. Moreover he kissed all his brethren, and wept upon them: and after that his brethren talked with him.'

GENESIS xlv. 1-15.

I

IF the writer of this inimitable scene of Joseph's reconciliation with his brethren was not simply an historian, he was one of the great dramatic geniuses of the world, master of a vivid minuteness like Defoe's, and able to touch the springs of tears by a pathetic simplicity like his who painted the death of Lear. Surely theories of legend and of mosaic work fail here.

1. We have, first, disclosure. The point at which the impenetrable, stern ruler breaks down is significant. It is after Judah's torrent of intercession for Benjamin, and self-sacrificing offer of himself for a substitute and a slave. Why did this touch Joseph so keenly? Was it not because his brother's speech shows that filial and fraternal affection was now strong enough in him to conquer self? He had sent Joseph to the fate which he is now ready to accept. He and the rest had thought nothing of the dagger they plunged into their father's heart by selling Joseph; but now he is prepared to accept bondage if he may save his father's grey head an ache. The whole of Joseph's harsh, enigmatical treatment had been directed to test them, and to ascertain if they were the same fierce, cruel men as of old. Now, when the doubt is answered, he can no longer dam back the flood of forgiving love. The wisest pardoning kindness seeks the assurance of sorrow and change in the offender, before it can safely and wholesomely enjoy the luxury of letting itself out in tears of reconciliation. We do not call

Digitized by Google

Joseph a type of Christ; but the plain process of forgiveness in his brotherly heart is moulded by the law which applies to God's pardon as to ours. All the wealth of yearning pardon is there, before contrition and repentance; but it is not good for the offender that it should be lavished on him, impenitent.

What a picture that is of the all-powerful ruler, choking down his emotion, and hurriedly ordering the audience chamber to be cleared! How many curious glances would be cast over their shoulders, by the slowly withdrawing crowd, at the strange group—the viceroy, usually so calm, thus inexplicably excited, and the huddled, rude shepherds, bewildered and afraid of what was coming next, in this unaccountable country! How eavesdroppers would linger as near as they durst, and how looks would be exchanged as the sounds of passionate weeping rewarded their open ears! The deepest feelings are not to be flaunted before the world. The man who displays his tears, and the man who is too proud to shed them, are both wrong; but perhaps it is worse to weep in public than not to weep at all.

'I am Joseph.' Were ever the pathos of simplicity, and the simplicity of pathos, more nobly expressed than in these two words?—(There are but two in the Hebrew.) Has the highest dramatic genius ever winged an arrow which goes more surely to the heart than that? The question, which hurries after the disclosure, seems strange and needless; but it is beautifully self-revealing, as expressive of agitation, and as disclosing a son's longing, and perhaps, too, as meant to relieve the brothers' embarrassment, and, as it were, to wrap the keen edge of the disclosure in soft wool.

2. We have, next, conscience-stricken silence. No

Digitized by Google

wonder his brethren 'could not answer' and 'were troubled at his presence.' They had found their brother a ruler; they had found the ruler their brother. Their former crime had turned what might have been a joy into a terror. Already they had come to know and regret it. It might seem to their startled consciences as if now they were about to expiate it. They would remember the severity of Joseph's past intercourse; they see his power, and cannot but be doubtful of his intentions. Had all his strange conduct been manœuvring to get them, Benjamin and all, into his toils, that one blow might perfect his revenge? Our suspicions are the reflections of our own hearts. So there they stand in open-mouthed, but dumb, wonder and dread. It would task the pencil of him who painted, on the mouldering refectory wall at Milan, the conflicting emotions of the apostles, at the announcement of the betrayer, to portray that silent company of abased and trembling criminals. They are an illustration of the profitlessness of all crime. Sin is, as one of its Hebrew names tells us, missing the mark—whether we think of it as fatally failing to reach the ideal of conduct, or as always, by a divine nemesis, failing to hit even the shabby end it aims at. 'Every rogue is a roundabout fool.' They put Joseph in the pit, and here he is on a throne. They have stained their souls, and embittered their father's life for twenty-two long years, and the dreams have come true, and all their wickedness has not turned the stream of the divine purpose, any more than the mud dam built by a child diverts the Mississippi. One flash has burned up their whole sinful past, and they stand scorched and silent among the ruins. So it always is. Sooner or later the same certainty of the futility of

Digitized by Google

his sin will overwhelm every sinful man, and dumb self-condemnation will stand in silent acknowledgment of evil desert before the throne of the Brother, who is now the Prince and the Judge, on whose fiat hangs life or death. To see Christ enthroned should be joy; but it may be turned into terror and silent anticipation of His just condemnation.

3. We have encouragement and complete forgiveness. That invitation to come close up to him, with which Joseph begins the fuller disclosure of his heart, is a beautiful touch. We can fancy how tender the accents, and how, with some lightening of fear, but still hesitatingly and ashamed, the shepherds, unaccustomed to courtly splendours, approached. The little pause while they draw near helps him to self-command, and he resumes his words in a calmer tone. With one sentence of assurance that he is their brother, he passes at once into that serene region where all passion and revenge die, unable to breathe its keen, pure air. The comfort which he addresses to their penitence would have been dangerous, if spoken to men blind to the enormity of their past. But it will not make a truly repentant conscience less sensitive, though it may alleviate the aching of the wound, to think that God has used even its sin for His own purposes. It will not take away the sense of the wickedness of the motive to know that a wonderful providence has rectified the consequences. It will rather deepen the sense of evil, and give new cause of adoration of the love that pardons the wrong, and the providence that neutralises the harm.

Joseph takes the true point of view, which we are all bound to occupy, if we would practise the Christian

Digitized by Google

grace of forgiveness. He looks beyond the mere human hate and envy to the divine purpose. 'The sword is theirs; the hand is Thine. He can even be grateful to his foes who have been unintentionally his benefactors. He thinks of the good that has come out of their malice, and anger dies within him.

Highest attainment of all, the good for which he is grateful is not his all-but-regal dignity, but the power to save and gladden those who would fain have slain, and had saddened him for many a weary year. We read in these utterances of a lofty piety and of a singularly gentle heart, the fruit of sorrow and the expression of thoughts which had slowly grown up in his mind, and had now been long familiar there. Such a calm, certain grasp of the divine shaping and meaning of his life could not have sprung up all at once in him, as he looked at the conscience-stricken culprits cowering before him. More than natural sweetness and placability must have gone to the making of such a temper of forgiveness. He must have been living near the Fountain of all mercy to have had so full a cup of it to offer. Because he had caught a gleam of the divine pardon, he becomes a mirror of it; and we may fairly see in this ill-used brother, yearning over the half-sullen sinners, and seeking to open a way for his forgiveness to steal into their hearts, and rejoicing over his very sorrows which have fitted him to save them alive, and satisfy them in the days of famine, an adumbration of our Elder Brother's forgiving love and saving tenderness.

4. The second part of Joseph's address is occupied with his message to Jacob, and shows how he longed for his father's presence. There is something very natural and beautiful in the repeated exhortations

Digitized by Google

to haste, as indicating the impatient love of a long-absent son. If his heart was so true to his father, why had he sent him no message for all these years? Egypt was near enough, and for nine years now he had been in power. Surely he could have gratified his heart. But he could not have learned by any other means his brethren's feelings, and if they were still what they had been, no intercourse would be possible. He could only be silent, and yearn for the way to open in God's providence, as it did.

The message to Jacob is sent from 'thy son Joseph,' in token that the powerful ruler lays his dignity at his father's feet. No elevation will ever make a true son forget his reverence for his father. If he rise higher in the world, and has to own an old man, away in some simple country home, for his sire, he will be proud to do it. The enduring sanctity of the family ties is not the least valuable lesson from our narrative for this generation, where social conditions are so often widely different in parents and in children. There is an affectionate spreading out of all his glory before his father's old eyes; not that he cared much about it for himself, since, as we have seen, elevation to him meant mainly work, but because he knew how the eyes would glisten at the sight. His mother, who would have been proud of him, is gone, but he has still the joy of gladdening his father by the exhibition of his dignity. It bespeaks a simple nature, unspoiled by prosperity, to delight thus in his father's delight, and to wish the details of all his splendour to be told him. A statesman who takes most pleasure in his elevation because of the good he can do by it, and because it will please the old people at home, must be a pure and lovable man. The command has

Digitized by Google

another justification in the necessity to assure his father of the wisdom of so great a change. God had set him in the Promised Land, and a very plain divine injunction was needed to warrant his leaving it. Such a one was afterwards given in vision; but the most emphatic account of his son's honour and power was none the less required to make the old Jacob willing to abandon so much, and go into such strange conditions.

We have another instance of the difference between man's purposes and God's counsel in this message. Joseph's only thought is to afford his family temporary shelter during the coming five years of famine. Neither he nor they knew that this was the fulfilment of the covenant with Abraham, and the bringing of them into the land of their oppression for four centuries. No shadow of that future was cast upon their joy, and yet, the steady march of God's plan was effected along the path which they were ignorantly preparing. The road-maker does not know what bands of mourners, or crowds of holiday makers, or troops of armed men may pass along it.

5. This wonderfully beautiful scene ends with the kiss of full reconciliation and frank communion. All the fear is out of the brothers' hearts. It has washed away all the envy along with it. The history of Jacob's household had hitherto been full of sins against family life. Now, at last, they taste the sweetness of fraternal love. Joseph, against whom they had sinned, takes the initiative, flinging himself with tears on the neck of Benjamin, his own mother's son, nearer to him than all the others, crowding his pent-up love in one long kiss. Then, with less of passionate affection, but more of pardoning love, he kisses his contrite

Digitized by Google

brothers. The offender is ever less ready to show love than the offended. The first step towards reconciliation, whether of man with man or of man with God, comes from the aggrieved. We always hate those whom we have harmed; and if enmity were ended only by the advances of the wrong-doer, it would be perpetual. The injured has the prerogative of praying the injurer to be reconciled. So was it in Pharaoh's throne-room on that long past day; so is it still in the audience chamber of heaven. 'He that might the vantage best have took found out the remedy.' 'We love Him, because He first loved us.'

The pardoned men find their tongues at last. Forgiveness has opened their lips, and though their reverence and thanks are no less, their confidence and familiarity are more. How they would talk when once the terror was melted away! So should it be with the soul which has tasted the sweetness of Christ's forgiving love, and has known 'the kisses of His mouth.' Long, unrestrained, and happy should be the intercourse which we forgiven sinners keep up with our Brother, the Prince of all the land. 'After that his brethren talked with him.'

JOSEPH, THE PARDONER AND PRESERVER

II

THE noble words in which Joseph dissipates his brothers' doubts have, as their first characteristic, the recognition of the God by whom his career had been shaped, and, for their next, the recognition of the purpose for which it had been. There is a world of tenderness and forgivingness in the addition

Digitized by Google

made to his first words in verse 4, 'Joseph, *your brother*.' He owns the mystic bond of kindred, and thereby assures them of his pardon for their sin against it. It was right that he should remind them of their crime, even while declaring his pardon. But he rises high above all personal considerations, and graciously takes the place of soother, instead of that of accuser. Far from cherishing thoughts of anger or revenge, he tries to lighten the reproaches of their own consciences. Thrice over in four verses he traces his captivity to God. He had learned that wisdom in his long years of servitude, and had not forgotten it in those of rule.

There will be little disposition in us to visit offences against ourselves on the offenders, if we discern God's purpose working through our sorrows, and see, as the Psalmist did, that even our foes are 'men which are Thy hand, O Lord.' True, His overruling providence does not make their guilt less; but the recognition of it destroys all disposition to revenge, and injured and injurer may one day unite in adoring the result of what the One suffered at the other's hands. Surely, some Christian persecutors and their victims have thus joined hands in heaven. If we would cultivate the habit of seeing God behind second causes, our hearts would be kept free from much wrath and bitterness.

Joseph was as certain of the purpose as of the source of his elevation. He saw now what he had been elevated for, and he eagerly embraced the task which was a privilege. No doubt, he had often brooded over the thought, 'Why am I thus lifted up?' and had felt the privilege of being a nation's saviour; but now he realises that he has a part to play in fulfilling God's designs in regard to the seed

Digitized by Google

of Abraham. Cloudy as his outlook into the future may have been, he knew that great promises affecting all nations were intertwined with his family, separation from whom had been a sorrow for years. But now the thought comes to him with sudden illumination and joy: 'This, then, is what it all has meant, that I should be a link in the chain of God's workings.' He knows himself to be God's instrument for effecting His covenant promises. How small a thing honour and position became in comparison!

We cannot all have great tasks in the line of God's purposes, but we can all feel that our little ones are made great by being seen to be in it. The less we think about chariots and gold chains, and the more we try to find out what God means by setting us where we are, and to do that, the better for our peace and true dignity. A true man does not care for the rewards of work half as much as for the work itself. Find out what God intends, and never mind whether He puts you in a dungeon or in a palace. Both places lie on the road which He has marked, and, in either, the main thing is to do His will.

Next comes the swiftly devised plan for carrying out God's purpose. It sounds as if Joseph, with prompt statesmanship, had struck it out then and there. At all events, he pours it forth with contagious earnestness and haste. Note how he says over and over again 'My father,' as if he loved to dwell on the name, but also as if he had not yet completely realised the renewal of the broken ties of brotherhood. It was some trial of the stuff he was made of, to have to bring his father and his family to be stared at, and perhaps mocked at, by the court. Many a successful man would be very much annoyed if his old father,

Digitized by Google

in his country clothes, and hands roughened by toil, sat down beside him in his prosperity. Joseph had none of that baseness. Jacob would come, if at all, as a half-starved immigrant, and would be 'an abomination to the Egyptians.' But what of that? He was 'my father,' and his son knows no better use to make of his dignity than to compel reverence for Jacob's grey hairs, which he will take care shall *not* be 'brought down with sorrow to the grave.' It is a very homely lesson—never be ashamed of your father. But in these days, when children are often better educated than their parents, and rise above them in social importance, it is a very needful one.

The first overtures of reconciliation should come from the side of the injured party. That is Christ's law, and if it were Christians' practice, there would be fewer alienations among them. It is Christ's law, because it is Christ's own way of dealing with us. He, too, was envied, and sold by His brethren. His sufferings were meant 'to preserve life.' Stephen's sermon in the Sanhedrin dwells on Joseph as a type of Christ; and the typical character is seen not least distinctly in this, that He against whom we have sinned pleads with us, seeks to draw us nearer to Himself, and to lead us to put away all hard thoughts of Him, and to cherish all loving ones towards Him, by showing us how void His heart is of anger against us, and how full of yearning love and of gracious intention to provide for us a dwelling-place, with abundance of all needful good, beside Himself, while the years of famine shall last.

Digitized by Google

GROWTH BY TRANSPLANTING

'Then Joseph came and told Pharaoh, and said, My father and my brethren, and their flocks, and their herds, and all that they have, are come out of the land of Canaan; and, behold, they are in the land of Goshen. And he took some of his brethren, even five men, and presented them unto Pharaoh. And Pharaoh said unto his brethren, What is your occupation? And they said unto Pharaoh, Thy servants are shepherds, both we, and also our fathers. They said moreover unto Pharaoh, For to sojourn in the land are we come; for thy servants have no pasture for their flocks; for the famine is sore in the land of Canaan: now therefore, we pray thee, let thy servants dwell in the land of Goshen. And Pharaoh spake unto Joseph, saying, Thy father and thy brethren are come unto thee: The land of Egypt is before thee; in the best of the land make thy father and brethren to dwell; in the land of Goshen let them dwell: and if thou knowest any men of activity among them, then make them rulers over my cattle. And Joseph brought in Jacob his father, and set him before Pharaoh: and Jacob blessed Pharaoh. And Pharaoh said unto Jacob, How old art thou? And Jacob said unto Pharaoh, The days of the years of my pilgrimage are an hundred and thirty years: few and evil have the days of the years of my life been, and have not attained unto the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage. And Jacob blessed Pharaoh, and went out from before Pharaoh. And Joseph placed his father and his brethren, and gave them a possession in the land of Egypt, in the best of the land, in the land of Rameses, as Pharaoh had commanded. And Joseph nourished his father, and his brethren, and all his father's household, with bread, according to their families.'—GENESIS xlvii. 1-12.

1. THE conduct of Joseph in reference to the settlement in Goshen is an example of the possibility of uniting worldly prudence with high religious principle and great generosity of nature. He had promised his brothers a home in that fertile eastern district, which afforded many advantages in its proximity to Canaan, its adaptation to pastoral life, and its vicinity to Joseph when in Zoan, the capital. But he had not consulted Pharaoh, and, however absolute his authority, it scarcely stretched to giving away Egyptian territory without leave. So his first care, when the wanderers arrive, is to manage the confirmation of the grant. He goes about it with considerable astuteness—a hereditary quality, which is redeemed from blame because used for unselfish purposes and unstained by deceit. He does not tell Pharaoh how far he had gone, but simply announces that his family

Digitized by Google

are in Goshen, as if awaiting the monarch's further pleasure. Then he introduces a deputation, no doubt carefully chosen, of five of his brothers (as if the whole number would have been too formidable), previously instructed how to answer. He knows what Pharaoh is in the habit of asking, or he knows that he can lead him to ask the required question, which will bring out the fact of their being shepherds, and utilise the prejudice against that occupation, to ensure separation in Goshen. All goes as he had arranged. Thanks partly to the indifference of the king, who seems to have been rather a *roi fainéant* in the hands of his energetic *maire du palais*, and to have been contented to give, with a flourish of formality, as a command to Joseph, what Joseph had previously carefully suggested to him (vers. 6, 7). There is nothing unfair in all this. It is good, shrewd management, and no fault can be found with it; but it is a new trait in the ideal character of a servant of God, and contrasts strongly with the type shown in Abraham. None the less, it is a legitimate element in the character and conduct of a good man, set down to do God's work in such a world. Joseph is a saint and a politician. His shrewdness is never craft; sagacity is not alien to consecration. No doubt it has to be carefully watched lest it degenerate; but prudence is as needful as enthusiasm, and he is the complete man who has a burning fire down in his heart to generate the force that drives him, and a steady hand on the helm, and a keen eye on the chart, to guide him. Be ye 'wise as serpents' but also 'harmless as doves.'

2. We may note in Joseph's conduct also an instance of a man in high office and not ashamed of his humble relations. One of the great lessons meant to be

Digitized by Google

taught by the whole patriarchal period was the sacredness of the family. That is, in some sense, the keynote of Joseph's history. Here we see family love, which had survived the trial of ill-usage and long absence, victorious over the temptation of position and high associates. It took some nerve and a great deal of affection, for the viceroy, whom envious and sarcastic courtiers watched, to own his kin. What a sweet morsel for malicious tongues it would be, 'Have you heard? He is only the son of an old shepherd, who is down in Goshen, come to pick up some crumbs there!' One can fancy the curled lips and the light laugh, as the five brothers, led by the great man himself, made their rustic reverences to Pharaoh. It is as if some high official in Paris were to walk in half a dozen peasants in blouse and sabots, and present them to the president as 'my brothers.' It was a brave thing to do; and it teaches a lesson which many people, who have made their way in the world, would be nobler and more esteemed if they learned.

3. The brother's words to Pharaoh are another instance of that ignorant carrying out of the divine purposes which we have already had to notice. They evidently contemplate only a temporary stay in the country. They say that they are come 'to *sojourn*'—the verb from which are formed the noun often rendered '*strangers*,' and that which Jacob uses in verse 9, 'my *pilgrimage*.' The reason for their coming is given as the transient scarcity of pasturage in Canaan, which implies the intention of return as soon as that was altered. Joseph had the same idea of the short duration of their stay; and though Jacob had been taught by vision that the removal was in

Digitized by Google

order to their being made a great nation, it does not seem that his sons' intentions were affected by that —if they knew it. So mistaken are our estimates. We go to a place for a month, and we stay in it for twenty years. We go to a place to settle for life, and our tent-pegs are pulled up in a week. They thought of five years, and it was to be nearly as many centuries. They thought of temporary shelter and food; God meant an education of them and their descendants. Over all this story the unseen Hand hovers, chastising, guiding, impelling; and the human agents are free and yet fulfilling an eternal purpose, blind and yet accountable, responsible for motives, and mercifully ignorant of consequences. So we all play our little parts. We have no call to be curious as to what will come of our deeds. This end of the action, the motive of it, is our care; the other end, the outcome of it, is God's business to see to.

4. We may also observe how trivial incidents are wrought into God's scheme. The Egyptian hatred of the shepherd class secured one of the prime reasons for the removal from Canaan—the unimpeded growth of a tribe into a nation. There was no room for further peaceful and separate expansion in that thickly populated country. Nor would there have been in Egypt, unless under the condition of comparative isolation, which could not have been obtained in any other way. Thus an unreasonable prejudice, possibly connected with religious ideas, became an important factor in the development of Israel; and, once again, we have to note the wisdom of the great Builder who uses not only gold, silver, and precious stones, but even wood, hay, stubble—follies and sins—for His edifice.

Digitized by Google

5. The interview of Jacob with Pharaoh is pathetic and beautiful. The old man comports himself, in all the later history of Joseph, as if done with the world, and waiting to go. 'Let me die, since I have seen thy face,' was his farewell to life. He takes no part in the negotiation about Goshen, but has evidently handed over all temporal cares to younger hands. A halo of removedness lies round his grey hairs, and to Pharaoh he behaves as one withdrawn from fleeting things, and, by age and nearness to the end, superior even to a king's dignity. As he enters the royal presence he does not do reverence, but invokes a blessing upon him. 'The less is blessed of the better.' He has nothing to do with court ceremonials or conventionalities. The hoary head is a crown of honour, Pharaoh recognises his right to address him thus by the kindly question as to his age, which implied respect for his years. The answer of the 'Hebrew Ulysses,' as Stanley calls him, breathes a spirit of melancholy not unnatural in one who had once more been uprooted, and found himself again a wanderer in his old age. The tremulous voice has borne the words across all the centuries, and has everywhere evoked a response in the hearts of weary and saddened men. Look at the component parts of this pensive retrospect.

Life has been to him a 'pilgrimage.' He thinks of all his wanderings from that far-off day when at Bethel he received the promise of God's presence 'in all places whither thou goest,' till this last happy and yet disturbing change. But he is thinking not only, perhaps not chiefly, of the circumstances, but of the spirit, of his life. This is, no doubt, the confession 'that they were strangers and pilgrims' referred to

Digitized by Google

in the Epistle to the Hebrews. He was a pilgrim, not because he had often changed his place of abode, but because he sought the 'city which hath foundations,' and therefore could not be at home here. The goal of his life lay in the far future; and whether he looked for the promises to be fulfilled on earth, or had the unformulated consciousness of immortality, and saluted the dimly descried coast from afar while tossing on life's restless ocean, he was effectually detached from the present, and felt himself an alien in the existing order. We have to live by the same hope, and to let it work the same estrangement, if we would live noble lives. Not because all life is change, nor because it all marches steadily on to the grave, but because our true home—the community to which we really belong, the metropolis, the mother city of our souls—is above, are we to feel ourselves strangers upon earth. They who only take into account the transiency of life are made sad, or sometimes desperate, by the unwelcome thought. But they whose pilgrimage is a journey home may look that transiency full in the face, and be as glad because of it as colonists on their voyage to the old country which they call 'home,' though they were born on the other side of the world and have never seen its green fields.

To Jacob's eyes his days seem 'few.' Abraham's one hundred and seventy-five years, Isaac's one hundred and eighty, were in his mind. But more than these was in his mind. The law of the moral perspective is other than that of the physical. The days in front, seen through the glass of anticipation, are drawn out; the days behind, viewed through the telescope of memory, are crowded together. What a moment looked all the long years of his struggling life—

Digitized by Google

shorter now than even had once seemed the seven years of service for his Rachel, that love had made to fly past on such swift wings! That happy wedded life, how short it looked! A bright light for a moment, and

> 'Ere a man could say "Behold!"
> The jaws of darkness did devour it up.'

It is well to lay the coolness of this thought on our fevered hearts, and, whether they be torn by sorrows or gladdened with bliss, to remember 'this also will pass' and the longest stretch of dreary days be seen in retrospect, in their due relation to eternity, as but a moment. That will not paralyse effort nor abate sweetness, but it will teach proportion, and deliver from the illusions of this solid-seeming shadow which we call life.

The pensive retrospect darkens as the old man's memory dwells upon the past. His days have not only been few—that could be borne—but they have been 'evil,' by which I understand not unfortunate so much as faulty. We have seen in preceding pages the slow process by which the crafty Jacob had his sins purged out of him, and became 'God's wrestler.' Here we learn that old wrong-doing, even when forgiven—or, rather, when and because forgiven—leaves regretful memories lifelong. The early treachery had been long ago repented of and pardoned by God and man. The nature which hatched it had been renewed. But here it starts up again, a ghost from the grave, and the memory of it is full of bitterness. No lapse of time deprives a sin of its power to sting. As in the old story of the man who was killed by a rattlesnake's poison fang embedded in a boot which

Digitized by Google

had lain forgotten for years, we may be wounded by suddenly coming against it, long after it is forgiven by God and almost forgotten by ourselves. Many a good man, although he knows that Christ's blood has washed away his guilt, is made to possess the iniquities of his youth. 'Thou shalt be ashamed and confounded, and never open thy mouth any more, when I am pacified toward thee for all that thou hast done.'

But this shaded retrospect is one-sided. It is true, and in some moods seems all the truth; but Jacob saw more distinctly, and his name was rightly Israel, when, laying his trembling hands on the heads of Joseph's sons, he laid there the blessing of 'the God which fed me all my life long, . . . the Angel which redeemed me from all evil.' That was his last thought about his life, as it began to be seen in the breaking light of eternal day. Pensive and penitent memory may call the years few and evil, but grateful faith even here, and still more the cleared vision of heaven, will discern more truly that they have been a long miracle of loving care, and that all their seeming evil has been transmuted into good.

TWO RETROSPECTS OF ONE LIFE

'And Jacob said unto Pharaoh, Few and evil have the days of the years of my life been.'—GENESIS xlvii. 9.

'The God which fed me all my life long unto this day; the Angel which redeemed me from all evil.'—GENESIS xlviii. 15, 16.

THESE are two strangely different estimates of the same life to be taken by the same man. In the latter Jacob categorically contradicts everything that he had said in the former. 'Few and evil,' he said

Digitized by Google

before Pharaoh. 'All my life long,' 'the Angel which redeemed me from all evil,' he said on his death-bed.

If he meant what he said when he spoke to Pharaoh, and characterised his life thus, he was wrong. He was possibly in a melancholy mood. Very naturally, the unfamiliar splendours of a court dazzled and bewildered the old man, accustomed to a quiet shepherd life down at Hebron. He had not come to see Pharaoh, he only cared to meet Joseph; and, as was quite natural, the new and uncongenial surroundings depressed him. Possibly the words are only a piece of the etiquette of an Eastern court, where it is the correct thing for the subject to depreciate himself in all respects as far inferior to the prince. And there may be little more than conventional humility in the words of my first text. But I am rather disposed to think that they express the true feeling of the moment, in a mood that passed and was followed by a more wholesome one.

I put the two sayings side by side just for the sake of gathering up one or two plain lessons from them.

1. We have here two possible views of life.

Now the key to the difference between these two statements and moods of feeling seems to me to be a very plain one. In the former of them there is nothing about God. It is all Jacob. In the latter we notice that there is a great deal more about God than about Jacob, and that determines the whole tone of the retrospect. In the first text Jacob speaks of 'the days of the years of *my* pilgrimage,' 'the days of the years of *my* life,' and so on, without a syllable about anything except the purely earthly view of life. Of course, when you shut out God, the past is all dark enough, grey and dismal, like the landscape on some

Digitized by Google

cloudy day, where the woods stand black, and the rivers creep melancholy through colourless fields, and the sky is grey and formless above. Let the sun come out, and the river flashes into a golden mirror, and the woods are alive with twinkling lights and shadows, and the sky stretches a blue pavilion above them, and all the birds sing. Let God into your life, and its whole complexion and characteristics change. The man who sits whining and complaining, when he has shut out the thought of a divine Presence, finds that everything alters when he brings that in.

And, then, look at the two particulars on which the patriarch dwells. 'I am only one hundred and thirty years old,' he says; a mere infant compared with Abraham and Isaac! How did he know he was not going to live to be as old as either of them? And 'if his days were evil,' as he said, was it not a good thing that they were few? But, instead of that, he finds reasons for complaint in the brevity of the life which, if it were as evil as he made it out to be, must often have seemed wearisomely long, and dragged very slowly. Now, both things are true—life is short, life is long. Time is elastic—you can stretch it or you can contract it. It is short compared with the duration of God; it is short, as one of the Psalms puts it pathetically, as compared with this Nature round us—'The earth abideth for ever'; we are strangers upon it, and there is no abiding for us. It is short as compared with the capacities and powers of the creatures that possess it; but, oh! if we think of our days as a series of gifts of God, if we look upon them, as Jacob looked upon them when he was sane, as being one continued shepherding by God, they stretch out into blessed length. Life is long enough

Digitized by Google

if it manifests that God takes care of us, and if we learn that He does. Life is long enough if it serves to build up a God-pleasing character.

It is beautiful to see how the thought of God enters into the dying man's remembrances in the shape which was natural to him, regard being had to his own daily avocations. For the word translated 'fed' means much more than supplied with nourishment. It is the word for doing the office of shepherd, and we must not forget, if we want to understand its beauty, that Jacob's sons said, 'Thy servants are shepherds; both we and also our fathers.' So this man, in the solitude of his pastoral life, and whilst living amongst his woolly people who depended upon his guidance and care, had learned many a lesson as to how graciously and tenderly and constantly fed, and led, and protected, and fostered by God were the creatures of His hand.

It was he, I suppose, who first gave to religious thought that metaphor which has survived temple and sacrifice and priesthood, and will survive even earth itself; for 'I am the Good Shepherd' is as true to-day as when first spoken by Jesus, and 'the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall lead them,' and be their Shepherd when the flock is carried to the upper pastures and the springs that never fail. The life which has brought us that thought of a Shepherd-God has been long enough; and the days which have been so expanded as to contain a continuous series of His benefits and protections need never be remembered as 'few,' whatsoever be the arithmetic that is applied to them.

The other contradiction is equally eloquent and significant. 'Few and evil' have my days been, said

Digitized by Google

Jacob, when he was not thinking about God; but when he remembered the Angel of the Presence, that mysterious person with whom he had wrestled at Peniel, and whose finger had lamed the thigh while His lips proclaimed a blessing, his view changed, and instead of talking about 'evil' days, he says, 'The Angel that redeemed me from all evil.' Yes, his life had been evil, whether by that we mean sorrowful or sinful, and the sorrows and the sins had been closely connected. A sorely tried man he had been. Far away back in the past had been his banishment from home; his disappointment and hard service with the churlish Laban; the misbehaviour of his sons; the death of Rachel—that wound which was never stanched; and then the twenty years' mourning for Rachel's son, the heir of his inheritance. These were the evils, the sins were as many, for every one of the sorrows, except perhaps the chiefest of them all, had its root in some piece of duplicity, dishonesty, or failure. But he was there in Egypt beside Joseph. The evils had stormed over him, but he was there still. And so at the end he says, 'The Angel . . . redeemed me from evil, though it smote me. Sorrow became chastisement, and I was purged of my sin by my calamities.' The sorrows are past, like some raging inundation that comes up for a night over the land and then subsides; but the blessing of fertility which it brought in its tawny waves abides with me yet. Joseph is by my side. 'I had not thought to see thy face, and God hath showed me the face of thy seed.' That sorrow is over. Rachel's grave is still by the wayside, and that sorest of sorrows has wrought with others to purify character. Jacob has been tried by sorrows; he has been purged from sins. 'The Angel

Digitized by Google

delivered me from all evil.' So, dear friends, sorrow is not evil if it helps to strip us from the evil that we love, and the ills that we bear are good if they alienate our affections from the ills that we do.

2. Secondly, note the wisdom and the duty of taking the completer and brighter view.

These first words of Jacob's are very often quoted as if they were the pattern of the kind of thing people ought to say, 'Few and evil have been the days of the years of my pilgrimage.' That is a text from which many sermons have been preached with approbation of the pious resignation expressed in it. But it does not seem to me that that is the tone of them. If the man believed what he said, then he was very ungrateful and short-sighted, though there were excuses to be made for him under the circumstances. If the days had been evil, he had made them so.

But the point which I wish to make now is that it is largely a matter for our own selection which of the two views of our lives we take. We may make our choice whether we shall fix our attention on the brighter or on the darker constituents of our past.

Suppose a wall papered with paper of two colours, one black, say, and the other gold. You can work your eye and adjust the focus of vision so that you may see either a black background or a gold one. In the one case the prevailing tone is gloomy, relieved by an occasional touch of brightness; and in the other it is brightness, heightened by a background of darkness. And so you can do with life, fixing attention on its sorrows, and hugging yourselves in the contemplation of these with a kind of morbid satisfaction, or bravely and thankfully and submissively and wisely resolving that you will rather seek to learn

Digitized by Google

what God means by darkness, and not forgetting to look at the unenigmatical blessings, and plain, obvious mercies, that make up so much of our lives. We have to govern memory as well as other faculties, by Christian principle. We have to apply the plain teaching of Christian truth to our sentimental, and often unwholesome, contemplations of the past. There is enough in all our lives to make material for plenty of whining and complaining, if we choose to take hold of them by that handle. And there is enough in all our lives to make us ashamed of one murmuring word, if we are devout and wise and believing enough to lay hold of them by that one. Remember that you can make your view of your life either a bright one or a dark one, and there will be facts for both; but the facts that feed melancholy are partial and superficial, and the facts that exhort, 'Rejoice in the Lord alway; and again I say, Rejoice,' are deep and fundamental.

3. So, lastly, note how blessed a thing it is when the last look is the happiest.

When we are amongst the mountains, or when we are very near them, they look barren enough, rough, stony, steep. When we travel away from them, and look at them across the plain, they lie blue in the distance; and the violet shadows and the golden lights upon them and the white peaks above make a dream of beauty. Whilst we are in the midst of the struggle, we are often tempted to think that things go hardly with us and that the road is very rough. But if we keep near our dear Lord, and hold by His hand, and try to shape our lives in accordance with His will—whatever be their outward circumstances and texture—then we may be very sure of this, that when the end comes, and we are far enough away from some of the

Digitized by Google

sorrows to see what they lead to and blossom into, then we shall be able to say, It was all very good, and to thank Him for all the way by which the Lord our God has led us.

In the same conversation in which the patriarch, rising to the height of a prophet and organ of divine revelation, gives this his dying testimony of the faithfulness of God, and declares that he has been delivered from all evil, he recurs to the central sorrow of his life; and speaks, though in calm words, of that day when he buried Rachel by 'Ephrath, which is Bethel.' But the pain had passed and the good was present to him. And so, leaving life, he left it according to his own word, 'satisfied with favour, and full of the blessing of the Lord.' So we in our turns may, at the last, hope that what we know not now will largely be explained; and may seek to anticipate our dying verdict by a living confidence, in the midst of our toils and our sorrows, that 'all things work together for good to them that love God.'

'THE HANDS OF THE MIGHTY GOD OF JACOB'

The archers shot at him, but his bow abode in strength, and the arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob.'
GENESIS xlix. 23, 24.

THESE picturesque words are part of what purports to be one of the oldest pieces of poetry in the Bible—the dying Jacob's prophetic blessing on his sons. Of these sons there are two over whom his heart seems especially to pour itself—Judah the ancestor of the royal tribe, and Joseph. The future fortunes of their descendants are painted in most glowing colours. And of these two, the blessing on the 'son who was

Digitized by Google

dead and is alive again, who was lost and is found,' is the fuller of tender desire and glad prediction. The words of our text are probably to be taken as prophecy, not as history—as referring to the future conflicts and victories of the tribe, not to the past trials and triumphs of its father. But be that as it may, they contain, in most vivid metaphor, the earliest utterance of a very familiar truth. They are the first hint of that thought which is caught up and expanded in many a later saying of psalmist, and prophet, and apostle. We hear their echoes in the great song ascribed to David 'in the day that the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul': 'He teacheth my hands to war, so that a bow of steel is broken by mine arms'; and the idea receives its fullest carrying out and noblest setting forth, in the trumpet-call of the apostle, who had seen more formidable weapons and a more terrible military discipline in Rome's legions than Jacob knew, and who pressed them into his stimulating call: 'Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might.' 'Put on the whole armour of God.' Strength for conflict by contact with the strength of God is the common thought of all these passages—a very familiar thought, which may perhaps be freshened for us by the singular intensity with which this metaphor of our text presents it. Look at the picture.—Here stands the solitary man, ringed all round by enemies full of bitter hate. Their arrows are on the string, their bows drawn to the ear. The shafts fly thick, and when they have whizzed past him, and he can be seen again, he stands unharmed, grasping his unbroken bow. The assault has shivered no weapon, has given no wound. He

Digitized by Google

has been able to stand in the evil day—and look! a pair of great, gentle, strong hands are laid upon his hands and arms, and strength passes into his feebleness from the touch of 'the hands of the mighty God of Jacob.' So the enemy have two, not one, to reckon with. By the side of the hunted man stands a mighty figure, and it is His strength, not the mortal's impotence, that has to be overcome. Some dream of such divine help in the struggle of battle has floated through the minds, and been enshrined in the legends, of many people, as when the panoplied Athene has been descried leading the Grecian armies, or, through the dust of conflict, the gleaming armour and white horses of the Twin Brethren were seen far in advance of the armies of Rome. But the dream is for us a reality. It *is* true that we go not to warfare at our own charges, nor by our own strength. If we love Him and try to make a brave stand against our own evil, and to strike a manful blow for God in this world, we shall not have to bear the brunt alone. Remember he who fights for God never fights without God.

There is a strange story in a later book of Scripture, which almost reads as if it had been modelled on some reminiscence of these words of the dying Jacob—and is, at any rate, a remarkable illustration of them. The kingdom of Israel, of which the descendants of Joseph were the most conspicuous part, was in the very crisis and agony of one of its Syrian wars. Its principal human helper was 'fallen sick of the sickness whereof he died.' And to his death-bed came, in a passion of perplexity and despair, the irresolute weakling who was then king, bewailing the impending withdrawal of the nation's best defence. The

Digitized by Google

dying Elisha, with curt authority, pays no heed to the tears of Joash, but bids him take bow and arrows. 'And he said to the king of Israel, Put thine hand upon the bow,' and he put his hand upon it; and '*Elisha put his hands upon the king's hands.*' Then, when the thin, wasted, transparent fingers of the old man were thus laid, guiding and infusing strength, by a strange paradox, into the brown, muscular hands of the young king, he tells him to open the casement that looked eastward towards the lands of the enemy, and, as the blinding sunshine and the warm air streamed into the sick-chamber, he bids him draw the bow. He was obeyed, and, as the arrow whizzed Jordanwards, the dying prophet followed its flight with words brief and rapid like it, 'the arrow of the Lord's deliverance.' Here we have all the elements of our text singularly repeated—the dying seer, the king the representative of Joseph in the royal dignity to which his descendants have come, the arrows and the bow, the strength for conflict by the touch of hands that had the strength of God in them. The lesson of that paradox that the dying gave strength to the living, the feeble to the strong, was the old one which is ever new, that mere human power is weakness when it is strongest, and that power drawn from God is omnipotent when it seems weakest. And the further lesson is the lesson of our text, that our hands are then strengthened, when His hands are laid upon them, of whom it is written: 'Thou hast a mighty arm: strong is Thy hand, and high is Thy right hand.

As a father in old days might have taken his little boy out to the butts, and put a bow into his hand, and given him his first lesson in archery, directing

Digitized by Google

his unsteady aim by his own firmer finger, and lending the strength of his wrist to his child's feebler pull, so God does with us. The sure, strong hand is laid on ours, and is 'profitable to direct.' A wisdom not our own is ever at our side, and ready for our service. We but dimly perceive the conditions of the conflict, and the mark at which we should aim is ever apt to be obscured to our perceptions. But in all cases where conscience is perplexed, or where the judgment is at fault, we may, if we will, have Him for our teacher. And when we know not where to strike the foes that seem invulnerable, like the warrior who was dipped in the magic stream, or clothed in mail impenetrable as rhinoceros' hide, He will make us wise to know the one spot where a wound is fatal. We shall not need to fight as he that beats the air; to strike at random; or to draw our bow at a venture, if we will let Him guide us.

Or if ever the work be seen clearly enough, but our poor hands cannot take aim for very trembling, or shoot for fear of striking something very dear to us, He will steady our nerves and make our aim sure and true. We have often, in our fight with ourselves, and in our struggle to get God's will done in the world, to face as cruel a perplexity as the father who had to split the apple on his son's head. The evil against which we have to contend is often so closely connected with things very precious to us, that it is hard to smite the one when there is such danger of grazing the other. Many a time our tastes, our likings, our prejudices, our hopes, our loves, make our sight dim, and our pulses too tumultuous to allow of a good, long, steady gaze and a certain aim. It is hard to keep the arrow's point firm when the heart throbs and

Digitized by Google

the hand shakes. But in all such difficult times He is ready to help us. 'Behold, we know not what to do, but our eyes are upon Thee,' is a prayer never offered in vain.

The word that is here rendered 'made strong,' might be translated 'made pliable,' or 'flexible,' conveying the notion of deftness and dexterity rather than that of simple strength. It is practised strength that He will give, the educated hand and arm, masters of the manipulation of the weapon. The stiffness and clumsiness of our handling, the obstinate rigidity as well as the throbbing feebleness of our arms, the dimness of our sight, may all be overcome. At His touch the raw recruit is as the disciplined veteran; the prophet who cannot speak because he is a child, gifted with a mouth and wisdom which all the adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor to resist. Do not be disheartened by your inexperience, or by your ignorance; but as the prophet said to the young king, Take the bow and shoot. God's strong hand will hold yours, and the arrow will fly true.

That strong hand is laid on ours, and lends its weight to our feeble pull. The bow is often too heavy for us to bend, but we do not need to strain our strength in the vain attempt to do it alone. Tasks seem too much for us. The pressure of our daily work overwhelms us. The burden of our daily anxieties and sorrows is too much. Some huge obstacle starts up in our path. Some great sacrifice for truth, honour, duty, which we feel we cannot make, is demanded of us. Some daring defiance of some evil, which has caught us in its toils, or which it is unfashionable to fight against, seems laid upon us. We cannot rise to the height of the occasion, or bring ourselves to

Digitized by Google

the wrench that is required. Or the wearing recurrence of monotonous duties seems to take all freshness out of our lives, and all spring out of ourselves; and we are ready to give over struggling any more, and let ourselves drift. Can we not feel that large hand laid on ours; and does not power, more and other than our own, creep into our numb and relaxed fingers? Yes, if we will let Him. His strength is made perfect in our weakness; and every man and woman who will make life a noble struggle against evil, vanity, or sin, may be very sure that God will direct and strengthen their hands to war, and their fingers to fight.

But the remarkable metaphor of the text not only gives the fact of divine strength being bestowed, but also the *manner* of the gift. What a boldness of reverent familiarity there is in that symbol of the hands of God laid on the hands of the man! How strongly it puts the contact between us and Him as the condition of our reception of power from Him! A true touch, as of hand to hand, conveys the grace. It is as when the prophet laid himself down with his warm lip on the dead boy's cold mouth, and his heart beating against the still heart of the corpse, till the life passed into the clay, and the lad lived. So, if we may say it, our Quickener bends Himself over all our deadness, and by His own warmth reanimates us.

Perhaps this same thought is one of the lessons which we are meant to learn from the frequency with which our Lord wrought His miracles of healing by the touch of His hand. 'Come and lay Thy hand on him, and he shall live.' 'And He put forth His hand and touched him, and said, I will, be thou clean.'

Digitized by Google

'Many said, He is dead; but Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.' The touch of His hand is healing and life. The touch of our hands is faith. In the mystery of His incarnation, in the flow of His sympathy, in the forth-putting of His power, He lays hold not on angels, but He lays hold on the seed of Abraham. By our lowly trust, by the forth-putting of our desires, we stretch 'lame hands of faith,' and, blessed be God! we do not 'grope,' but we grasp His strong hand and are held up.

The contact of our spirits with His Spirit is a contact far more real than the touch of earthly hands that grasp each other closest. There is ever some film of atmosphere between the palms. But 'he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit,' and he that clasps Christ's outstretched hand of help with his outstretched hand of weakness, holds Him with a closeness to which all unions of earth are gaping gulfs of separation. You remember how Mary cast herself at Christ's feet on the resurrection morning, and would have flung her arms round them in the passion of her joy. The calm word which checked her has a wonderful promise in it. 'Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to my Father'; plainly leading to the inference, 'When I am ascended, then you may touch Me.' And that touch will be more reverent, more close, more blessed, than any clasping of His feet, even with such loving hands, and is possible for us all for evermore.

Nothing but such contact will give us strength for conflict and for conquest. And the plain lesson therefore is—see to it, that the contact is not broken by you. Put away the metaphor, and the simple English of the advice is just this:—First, live in the desire

Digitized by Google

and the confidence of His help in all your need, of His strength as all your power. As a part of that confidence—its reverse and under side, so to speak—cherish the profound sense of your own weakness.

> 'In our own strength we nothing can;
> Full soon were we down-ridden'—

as Luther has taught us to sing. Let there be a constant renewal, in the midst of your duties and trials, of that conscious dependence and feeling of insufficiency. Stretch out the empty hands to Him in that desire and hope, which, spoken or silent, is prayer. Keep the communications open, by which His strength flows into your souls. Let them not be choked with self-confidence, with vanities, with the rubbish of your own nature, or of the world. Do not twitch away your hands from under the strong hands that are laid so gently upon them. But let Him cover, direct, cherish, and strengthen your poor fingers till they are strong and nimble for all your work and warfare. If you go into the fight trusting to your own wit and wisdom, to the vigour of your own arm, or the courage of your own heart, that very foolhardy confidence is itself defeat, for it is sin as well as folly, and nothing can come of it but utter collapse and disaster. But if you will only go to your daily fight with yourself and the world, with your hand grasping God's hand, you will be able to 'withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.' The enemies may compass you about like bees, but in the name of the Lord you can destroy them. Their arrows may fly thick enough to darken the sun, but, as the proud old boast has it, 'then we can fight in the shade'; and when their harmless points have buried themselves

Digitized by Google

in the ground, you will stand unhurt, your unshivered bow ready for the next assault, and your hands made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob. 'In all these things we are more than conquerors, through Him that loved us.'

THE SHEPHERD, THE STONE OF ISRAEL

'. . . The mighty God of Jacob. From thence is the Shepherd, the stone of Israel.'—GENESIS xlix. 24.

A SLIGHT alteration in the rendering will probably bring out the meaning of these words more correctly. The last two clauses should perhaps not be read as a separate sentence. Striking out the supplement 'is,' and letting the previous sentence run on to the end of the verse, we get a series of names of God, in apposition with each other, as the sources of the strength promised to the arms of the hands of the warlike sons of Joseph. From the hands of the mighty God of Jacob—from thence, from the Shepherd, the stone of Israel—the power will come for conflict and for conquest. This exuberant heaping together of names of God is the mark of the flash of rapturous confidence which lit up the dying man's thoughts when they turned to God. When he begins to think of Him he cannot stay his tongue. So many aspects of His character, so many remembrances of His deeds, come crowding into his mind; so familiar and so dear are they, that he must linger over the words, and strive by this triple repetition to express the manifold preciousness of Him whom no name, nor crowd of names, can rightly praise. So earthly love ever does with its earthly objects,

Digitized by Google

inventing and reiterating epithets which are caresses. Such repetitions are not tautologies, for each utters some new aspect of the one subject, and comes from a new gush of heart's love towards it. And something of the same rapture and unwearied recurrence to the Name that is above every name should mark the communion of devout souls with their heavenly Love. What a wonderful burst of such praise flowed out from David's thankful heart, in his day of deliverance, like some strong current, with its sevenfold wave, each crested with the Name—'The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer: my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower.'

These three names which we find here are striking and beautiful in themselves; in their juxtaposition; in their use on Jacob's lips. They seem to have been all coined by him, for, if we accept this song as a true prophecy uttered by him, we have here the earliest instance of their occurrence. They all have a history, and appear again expanded and deepened in the subsequent revelation. Let us look at them as they stand.

1. *The Mighty God of Jacob.*—The meaning of such a name is clear enough. It is He who has shown Himself mighty and mine by His deeds for me all through my life. The dying man's thoughts are busy with all that past from the day when he went forth from the tent of Isaac, and took of the stones of the field for his pillow when the sun went down. A perplexed history it had been, with many a bitter sorrow, and many a yet bitterer sin. Passionate grief and despairing murmurs he had felt and flung out, while it slowly unfolded itself. When the Pharaoh

Digitized by Google

had asked, 'How old art thou?' he had answered in words which owe their sombreness partly to obsequious assumption of insignificance in such a presence, but have a strong tinge of genuine sadness in them too: 'Few and evil have the days of the years of my life been.' But lying dying there, with it all well behind him, he has become wiser; and now it all looks to him as one long showing forth of the might of his God, who had been with him all his life long, and had redeemed him from all evil. He has got far enough away to see the lie of the land, as he could not do while he was toiling along the road. The barren rocks and white snow glow with purple as the setting sun touches them. The struggles with Laban; the fear of Esau; the weary work of toilsome years; the sad day when Rachel died, and left to him the 'son of her sorrow'; the heart sickness of the long years of Joseph's loss—all have faded away, or been changed into thankful wonder at God's guidance. The one thought which the dying man carries out of life with him is: God has shown Himself mighty, and He has shown Himself mine.

For each of us, our own experience should be a revelation of God. The things about Him which we read in the Bible are never living and real to us till we have verified them in the facts of our own history. Many a word lies on the page, or in our memories, fully believed and utterly shadowy, until in some soul's conflict we have had to grasp it, and found it true. Only so much of our creed as we have proved in life is really ours. If we will only open our eyes and reflect upon our history as it passes before us, we shall find every corner of it filled with the manifestations to our hearts and to our minds of a present

Digitized by Google

God. But our folly, our stupidity, our impatience, our absorption with the mere outsides of things, our self-will, blind us to the Angel with the drawn sword who resists us, as well as to the Angel with the lily who would lead us. So we waste our days; are deaf to His voice speaking through all the clatter of tongues, and blind to His bright presence shining through all the dimness of earth; and, for far too many of us, we never can see God in the present, but only discern Him when He has passed by, like Moses from his cleft. Like this same Jacob, we have to say: 'Surely God was in this place, and I knew it not.' Hence we miss the educational worth of our lives, are tortured with needless cares, are beaten by the poorest adversaries, and grope amidst what seems to us a chaos of pathless perplexities, when we might be marching on assured and strong, with God for our guide, and the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob for our defence.

Notice, too, how distinctly the thought comes out in this name—that the very vital centre of a man's religion is his conviction that God is his. Jacob will not be content with thinking of God as the God of his fathers; he will not even be content with associating himself with them in the common possession; but he must feel the full force of the intensely personal bond that knits him to God, and God to him. Of course such a feeling does not ignore the blessed fellowship and family who also are held in this bond. The God of Jacob is to the patriarch also the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob. But that comes second, and this comes first. Each man for himself must put forth the hand of his own faith, and grasp that great hand for his own guide. '*My*

Digitized by Google

Lord and *my* God' is the true form of the confession. 'He loved *me* and gave Himself for *me*,' is the shape in which the Gospel of Christ melts the soul. God is mine because His love individualises me, and I have a distinct place in His heart, His purposes, and His deeds. God is mine, because by my own individual act—the most personal which I can perform—I cast myself on Him, by my faith appropriate the common salvation, and open my being to the inflow of His power. God is mine, and I am His, in that wonderful mutual possession, with perpetual interchange of giving and receiving not only gifts but selves, which makes the very life of love, whether it be love on earth or love in heaven.

Remember, too, the profound use which our Lord made of this name, wherein Jacob claims to possess God. Because Moses at the bush called God, the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, they cannot have ceased to be. The personal relations, which subsist between God and the soul that clasps Him for its own, demand an immortal life for their adequate expression, and make it impossible that Death's skeleton fingers should have power to untie such a bond. Anything is conceivable, rather than that the soul which can say 'God is mine' should perish. And that continued existence demands, too, a state of being which shall correspond to itself, in which its powers shall all be exercised, its desires fulfilled, its possibilities made facts. Therefore there must be the resurrection. 'God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He hath prepared for them a city.'

The dying patriarch left to his descendants the legacy of this great name, and often, in later times, it was used to quicken faith by the remembrance of

Digitized by Google

the great deeds of God in the past. One instance may serve as a sample of the whole. 'The Lord of Hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge.' The first of these two names lays the foundation of our confidence in the thought of the boundless power of Him whom all the forces of the universe, personal and impersonal, angels and stars, in their marshalled order, obey and serve. The second bids later generations claim as theirs all that the old history reveals as having belonged to the 'world's grey fathers.' They had no special prerogative of nearness or of possession. The arm that guided them is unwearied, and all the past is true still, and will for evermore be true for all who love God. So the venerable name is full of promise and of hope for us: 'The God of Jacob is our refuge.'

2. *The Shepherd.* — How that name sums up the lessons that Jacob had learned from the work of himself and of his sons! 'Thy servants are shepherds,' they said to Pharaoh; 'both we, and also our sons.' For fourteen long, weary years he had toiled at that task. 'In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night; and my sleep departed from mine eyes,' and his own sleepless vigilance and patient endurance seem to him to be but shadows of the loving care, the watchful protection, the strong defence, which 'the God, who has been my Shepherd all my life long,' had extended to him and his. Long before the shepherd king, who had been taken from the sheepcotes to rule over Israel, sang his immortal psalm, the same occupation had suggested the same thought to the shepherd patriarch. Happy they whose daily work may picture for them some aspect of God's care—or rather, happy they whose eyes are

Digitized by Google

open to see the dim likeness of God's care which every man's earthly relations, and some part of his work, most certainly present.

There can be no need to draw out at length the thoughts which that sweet and familiar emblem has conveyed to so many generations. Loving care, wise guidance, fitting food, are promised by it; and docile submission, close following at the Shepherd's heels, patience, innocence, meekness, trust, are required. But I may put emphasis for a moment on the connection between the thought of 'the mighty God of Jacob' and that of 'the Shepherd.' The occupation, as we see it, does not call for a strong arm, or much courage, except now and then to wade through snow-drifts, and dig out the buried and half-dead creatures. But the shepherds whom Jacob knew, had to be hardy, bold fighters. There were marauders lurking ready to sweep away a weakly guarded flock. There were wild beasts in the gorges of the hills. There was danger in the sun by day on these burning plains, and in the night the wolves prowled round the flock. We remember how David's earliest exploits were against the lion and the bear, and how he felt that even his duel with the Philistine bully was not more formidable than these had been. If we will read into our English notions of a shepherd this element of danger and of daring, we shall feel that these two clauses are not to be taken as giving the contrasted ideas of strength and gentleness, but the connected ones of strength, and therefore protection and security. We have the same connection in later echoes of this name. 'Behold, the Lord God shall come with *strong* hand; He shall feed His flock like a shepherd.' And our Lord's use of the figure brings

Digitized by Google

into all but exclusive prominence the good shepherd's conflict with the ravening wolves—a conflict in which he must not hesitate even 'to lay down his life for the sheep.' As long as the flock are here, amidst dangers and foes, and wild weather, the arm that guides must be an arm that can guard; and none less mighty than the Mighty One of Jacob can be the Shepherd of men. But a higher fulfilment yet awaits this venerable emblem, when in other pastures, where no lion nor any ravening beast shall come, the 'Lamb, which is in the midst of the throne,' and is Shepherd as well as Lamb, 'shall feed them, and lead them by living fountains of waters.'

3. *The Stone of Israel.*—Here, again, we have a name, that after-ages have caught up and cherished, used for the first time. I suppose the Stone of Israel means much the same thing as the Rock. If so, that symbol, too, which is full of such large meanings, was coined by Jacob. It is, perhaps, not fanciful to suppose that it owes its origin to the scenery of Palestine. The wild cliffs of the eastern region where Peniel lay, or the savage fastnesses in the southern wilderness, a day's march from Hebron, where he lived so long, came back to his memory amid the flat, clay land of Egypt; and their towering height, their immovable firmness, their cool shade, their safe shelter, spoke to him of the unalterable might and impregnable defence which he had found in God. So there is in this name the same devout, reflective laying-hold upon experience which we have observed in the preceding.

There is also the same individualising grasp of God as his very own; for 'Israel' here is, of course, to be taken not as the name of the nation but as his own

Digitized by Google

name, and the intention of the phrase is evidently to express what God had been to him personally.

The general idea of this symbol is perhaps firmness, solidity. And that general idea may be followed out in various details. God is a rock for a foundation. Build your lives, your thoughts, your efforts, your hopes there. The house founded on the rock will stand though wind and rain from above smite it, and floods from beneath beat on it like battering-rams. God is a rock for a fortress. Flee to Him to hide, and your defence shall be the 'munitions of rocks,' which shall laugh to scorn all assault, and never be stormed by any foe. God is a rock for shade and refreshment. Come close to Him from out of the scorching heat, and you will find coolness and verdure and moisture in the clefts, when all outside that grateful shadow is parched and dry.

The word of the dying Jacob was caught up by the great law-giver in his dying song. 'Ascribe ye greatness to our God. He is the Rock.' It reappears in the last words of the shepherd king, whose grand prophetic picture of the true King is heralded by 'The Rock of Israel spake to me.' It is heard once more from the lips of the greatest of the prophets in his glowing prophecy of the song of the final days: 'Trust ye in the Lord for ever; for in the Lord Jehovah is the Rock of Ages,' as well as in his solemn prophecy of the Stone which God would lay in Zion. We hear it again from the lips that cannot lie: 'Did ye never read in the Scriptures, The Stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head-stone of the corner?' And for the last time the venerable metaphor which has cheered so many ages appears in the words of that Apostle who was 'surnamed Cephas,

Digitized by Google

which is by interpretation a stone': 'To whom coming as unto a living Stone, ye also as living stones are built up.' As on some rocky site in Palestine, where a hundred generations in succession have made their fortresses, one may see stones with the bevel that tells of early Jewish masonry, and above them Roman work, and higher still masonry of crusading times, and above it the building of to-day; so we, each age in our turn, build on this great rock foundation, dwell safe there for our little lives, and are laid to peaceful rest in a sepulchre in the rock. On Christ we may build. In Him we may dwell and rest secure. We may die in Jesus, and be gathered to our own people, who, having died, live in Him. And though so many generations have reared their dwellings on that great rock, there is ample room for us too to build. We have not to content ourselves with an uncertain foundation among the shifting rubbish of perished dwellings, but can get down to the firm virgin rock for ourselves. None that ever builded there have been confounded. We clasp hands with all who have gone before us. At one end of the long chain this dim figure of the dying Jacob, amid the strange vanished life of Egypt, stretches out his withered hands to God the Stone of Israel; at the other end, we lift up ours to Jesus, and cry:—

'Rock of Ages! cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee.'

The faith is one. One will be the answer and the reward. May it be yours and mine!

Digitized by Google

A CALM EVENING, PROMISING A BRIGHT MORNING

'And Joseph returned into Egypt, he, and his brethren, and all that went up with him to bury his father, after he had buried his father. And when Joseph's brethren saw that their father was dead, they said, Joseph will peradventure hate us, and will certainly requite us all the evil which we did unto him. And they sent a messenger unto Joseph, saying, Thy father did command before he died, saying, So shall ye say unto Joseph, Forgive, I pray thee now, the trespass of thy brethren, and their sin; for they did unto thee evil: and now, we pray thee, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of thy father. And Joseph wept when they spake unto him. And his brethren also went and fell down before his face; and they said, Behold, we be thy servants. And Joseph said unto them, Fear not: for am I in the place of God? But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive. Now therefore fear ye not: I will nourish you, and your little ones. And he comforted them, and spake kindly unto them. And Joseph dwelt in Egypt, he, and his father's house: and Joseph lived an hundred and ten years. And Joseph saw Ephraim's children of the third generation: the children also of Machir the son of Manasseh were brought up upon Joseph's knees. And Joseph said unto his brethren, I die: and God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land unto the land which he sware to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. And Joseph took an oath of the children of Israel, saying, God will surely visit you, and ye shall carry up my bones from hence. So Joseph died, being an hundred and ten years old: and they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.'—GENESIS l. 14-26.

JOSEPH'S brothers were right in thinking that he loved Jacob better than he did them; and they knew only too well that he had reasons for doing so. But their fear that Jacob's death would be followed by an outbreak of long-smothered revenge betrayed but too clearly their own base natures. They thought him like themselves, and they knew themselves capable of nursing wrath to keep it warm through long years of apparent kindliness. They had no room in their hearts for frank, full forgiveness. So they had lived on through numberless signs of their brother's love and care, and still kept the old dread, and, probably, not a little of the old envy. How much happiness they had lost by their slowness to believe in Joseph's love!

Is there nothing like this in our thoughts of God? Do men not live for years on His bounty, and all the

Digitized by Google

while cherish suspicions of His heart? 'Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself.' It is hard to believe in a love which has no faintest trace of desire for vengeance for all past slights. It is hard for hearts conscious of their own slowness to pardon, to realise undoubtingly God's infinite placability.

The brothers' procedure is marked by unwarrantable lack of trust in Joseph. Why did they not go to him at once, and appeal to his brotherly affection? Their roundabout way of going to work by sending a messenger was an insult to their brother, though it may have been meant as honour to the viceroy. The craft which was their father's by nature seems to have been amply transmitted. The story of Jacob's dying wish looks very apocryphal. If he had been afraid of Joseph's behaviour when he was gone, he was much more likely to have spoken to Joseph about it before he went, than to have left the gun loaded and bid them fire it after his death. Jacob knew his son better, and trusted him more than his brothers did.

We note, too, the ingenious way of slipping in motives for forgiving, first in putting the mention of their relationship into Jacob's mouth, and then claiming to be worshippers of 'thy (not our) father's God.' They had proved how truly they were both, when they sold him to the Midianites!

Joseph's tears were a good answer. No doubt they were partly drawn out by the shock of finding that he had been so misunderstood, but they were omens of his pardon. So, when they were reported to the brothers, they came themselves, and fulfilled the old dream by falling down before him in abjectness. They do not call themselves his brethren, but his slaves, as if grovelling was the way to win love or to show it. A little

Digitized by Google

affection would have gone farther than much submission. If their attitude truly expressed their feelings, their hearts were as untouched by Joseph's years of magnanimous kindness as a rock by falling rain. If it was a theatrical display of feigned subjection, it was still worse. Our Brother, against whom we have sinned, wants love, not cowering; and if we believe in His forgiveness, we shall give Him the hearts which He desires, and after that shall render the unconditional submission which only trust and love can yield.

Joseph's answer is but the reiteration of his words at his first making himself known. He soothes unworthy fears, says not a word of reproach for their misunderstanding of him, waives all pretension to deal out that retribution which God alone sends, and shows that he has lost all bitterness in thinking of the past, since he sees in it, not the working of their malice, but of God's providence, and is ready to thank, if not them, at any rate Him, for having, by even so painful a way, made him the instrument of widespread good. A man who sees God's hand in his past, and thinks lightly of his sorrows and nobly of the opportunities of service which they have brought him, will waste no feeling on the men who were God's tools. If we want to live high above low hatreds and revenges, let us cultivate the habit of looking behind men to God. So we shall be saved from many fruitless pangs over irrevocable losses and from many disturbing feelings about other people.

The sweet little picture of the great minister's last days is very tenderly touched. Surrounded by his kindred, probably finding in a younger generation the reverence and affection which the elder had failed to give, he wears away the calm evening of the life which

Digitized by Google

had opened so stormily. It 'came in like a lion, it goes out like a lamb.' The strong domestic instincts so characteristic of the Hebrew race had full gratification. Honours and power at court and kingdom probably continued, but these did not make the genial warmth which cheered the closing years. It was that he saw his children's children's children, and that they gathered round his knees in confidence, and received from him his benediction.

But it is in his death that the flame shoots up most brightly at the last. 'By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones.' He had been an Egyptian to all appearance all his life from the day of his captivity, filling his place at court, marrying an Egyptian woman, and bearing an Egyptian name, but his dying words show how he had been a stranger in the midst of it all. As truly as his fathers who dwelt in tents, he too felt that he here had no continuing city. He lived by faith in God's promises, and therefore his heart was in the unseen future far more than in the present.

He died with the ancestral assurance on his lips. Jacob, dying, had said to him, 'Behold, I die; but God shall be with you, and bring you again unto the land of your fathers' (Gen. xlviii. 21). Joseph hands on the hope to his descendants. It is a grand instance of indomitable confidence in God's word, not nonplussed, bewildered, or weakened, though the man who cherishes it dies without seeing even a beginning of fulfilment. Such a faith bridges the gulf of death as a very small matter. In the strength of it we may drop our unfinished tasks, and, needful as we may seem to wider or narrower circles, may be sure

Digitized by Google

that God and His word live, though we die. No man is necessary. Israel was safe in Egypt, and sure to come out of it, though Joseph's powerful protection was withdrawn.

His career may teach another lesson; namely, that true faith does not detach us from strenuous interest and toil in the present. Though the great hope burned in his heart, he did all his work as prime minister all the better because of it. It should always be so. Life here is not worth living if there is not another. The distance dignifies the foreground. The highest importance and nobleness of the life that now is, lie in its being preparation or apprenticeship for the greater future. The Egyptian vizier, with Canaan written on his heart, and Egypt administered by his hands, is a type of what every Christian should be.

Possibly Joseph's 'commandment concerning his bones' may have been somewhat influenced by the Egyptian belief which underlies their practice of embalming the body. He, too, may have thought that, in some mysterious way, he would share in the possession of the land in which his bones were to be laid. Or he may simply have been yielding to natural sentiment. It is noteworthy that Jacob desired to be laid beside his ancestors, and Joseph to be kept in Egypt for a time. Both had the same assurance as to future possession of Canaan, but it led to different wishes as to burial. Perhaps Joseph felt that his position in Egypt required that his embalmed body should for a while remain there. Perhaps he wished to leave with his people a silent witness of his own hope, and a preacher, eloquent in its dumbness, of the duty of their keeping alive that hope, whatever might come upon them.

Digitized by Google

'In a coffin in Egypt'—so the book ends. It might seem that that mummy-case proclaimed rather the futility of the hope of restoration to the land, and, as centuries rolled away, and the bondage became heavier, no doubt many a wondering and doubting look was turned to it. But there it lay, perhaps neglected, for more than three hundred years, the visible embodiment of a hope which smiled at death and counted centuries as nothing. At last the day came which vindicated the long-deferred confidence; and, as the fugitives in their haste shouldered the heavy sarcophagus, and set out with it for the Land of Promise, surely some thrill of trust would pass through their ranks, and in some hearts would sound the exhortation, 'If the vision tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry.'

We have not a dead Joseph to bid us wait with patience and never lose our firm grip of God's promises, but we have a living Jesus. Our march to the land of rest is headed, not by the bones of a departed leader, but by the Forerunner, 'who is for us entered' whither He will bring all who trust in Him. Therefore we should live, as Joseph lived, with desires and trust reaching out beyond things seen to the land assured to us by God's promise, doing our day's task all the more vigorously because we do not belong to the order of things in the midst of which we live; and then, when we lie down at the end of our life's work, we shall not be saddened by disappointed hopes, nor reluctantly close our eyes on good to come, when we shall not be there to share it, but be sure that we shall 'see the good of Thy chosen,' and 'rejoice in the gladness of Thy nation.'

Digitized by Google

JOSEPH'S FAITH

'Joseph took an oath of the children of Israel, saying, God will surely visit you, and ye shall carry up my bones from hence.'—GENESIS l. 25.

THIS is the one act of Joseph's life which the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews selects as the sign that he too lived by faith. 'By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones.'

It was at once a proof of how entirely he believed God's promise, and of how earnestly he longed for its fulfilment. It was a sign too of how little he felt himself at home in Egypt, though to outward appearance he had become completely one of its people. The ancestral spirit was in him true and strong though he was 'separate from his brethren.' He bore an Egyptian name, a swelling title, he married an Egyptian woman, he had an Egyptian priest for father-in-law, but he was an Israelite in heart; and in the midst of official cares and a surfeit of honours, his desires turned away from them all towards the land promised by God to his fathers.

And when he lay dying, he could not bear to think that his bones should moulder in the country where his life had been spent. 'I know that this is not our land after all; swear to me that when the promise that has tarried so long comes at last, you will take me, all that is left of me, and carry it up, and lay it in some corner of the blessed soil, that I too may somehow share in the inheritance of His people. God shall surely visit you. Carry my bones up hence.'

Perhaps there is in this wish a trace of something

Digitized by Google

besides faith in God's promises. Of course, there is a natural sentiment which no clearness of knowledge of a future state wholly dispels. We all feel as if somehow our bodies remain a part of ourselves even after death, and we have wishes where they shall lie. But perhaps Joseph had a more definite belief on the matter than that. What theory of another life does an Egyptian mummy express? Why all that sedulous care to preserve the poor relics? Was it not a consequence of the belief that somehow or other there could be no life without a body, and that in some mysterious way the preservation of that contributed to the continuance of this? And so Joseph, who was himself going to be embalmed and put into a mummy-case, may have caught something of the tone of thought prevalent around him, and have believed that to carry his bones to the land of promise was, in some obscure manner, to carry *him* thither. Be that as it may, whether the wish came from a mistake about the relation of flesh and spirit, or only from the natural desire which we too possess, that our graves may not be among strangers, but beside our father's and our mother's—that is not the main thing in this fact. The main thing is that this dying man believed God's promise, and claimed his share in it.

And on this the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, whoever he was, fastens. Neglecting the differences in knowledge between Joseph and the Christians whom he addresses, and pointing back to the strong confidence in God and longing for participation in the promises which brightened the glazing eye and gave *him* 'hope in his death,' he declares that the principle of action which guided this man in the dim twilight of early revelation, is that same faith which

Digitized by Google

ought to guide us who live in the full light of the unsetting sun.

Taking, then, this incident, with the New Testament commentary upon it, it leads us to a truth which we often lose sight of, but which is indispensable if we would understand the relations of the earlier and later days.

1. *Faith is always the same, though knowledge varies.* —There is a vast difference between a man's creed and a man's faith. The one may vary, does vary within very wide limits; the other remains the same. The things believed have been growing from the beginning—the attitude of mind and will by which they have been grasped has been the same from the beginning, and will be the same to the end. And not only so, but it will be substantially the same in heaven as it is on earth. For there is but one bond which unites men to God; and that emotion of loving trust is one and the same in the dim twilight of the world's morning, and amid the blaze of the noonday of heaven. The contents of faith, that on which it relies, the treasure it grasps, changes; the essence of faith, the act of reliance, the grasp which holds the treasure. does not change.

It is difficult to decide how much Joseph's gospel contained. From our point of view it was very imperfect. The spiritual life was nourished in him and in the rest of 'the world's grey fathers' on what looks to us but like seven basketsful of fragments. They had promises, indeed, in which we, looking at them with the light of fulfilment blazing upon them, can see the broad outlines of the latest revelation, and can trace the future flower all folded together and pale in the swelling bud. But we shall err greatly

Digitized by Google

if we suppose, as we are apt to do, that these promises were to them anything like what they are to us. It requires a very vigorous exercise of very rare gifts to throw ourselves back to their position, and to gain any vivid and approximately accurate notion of the theology of these ancient lovers of God.

This, at any rate, we may, perhaps, say: they had a sure and clear knowledge of the living God, who had talked with them as with a friend; they knew His inspiring, guiding presence; they knew the forgiveness of sins; they knew, though they very dimly understood, the promise, 'In thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' How far they looked across the gulf of death and beheld anything—even cloudland—on the other side, is a question very hard to answer, and about which confident dogmatism, either affirmative or negative, is unwarranted. But it is to be remembered that, whether they had any notion of a future state or no, they had a promise which fulfilled for them substantially the same office as that does for us. The promise of the land of Canaan gleaming before them through the mists, bare and 'earthly' as it seems to us when compared with our hope of an inheritance incorruptible in the heavens, is, by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, identified with that hope of ours, for he expressly says that, whilst they were looking for an earthly Canaan, they were 'desiring a better country, that is an heavenly.' So that, whether they definitely expected a life after death or not, the anticipation of the land promised to them and to their fathers held the same place in their creed, and as a moral agent in their lives, which the rest that remains for the people of God ought to do in ours.

Digitized by Google

And it is to be taken into account also that fellowship with God has in it the germ of the assurance of immortality. It seems almost impossible to suppose a state of mind in which a man living in actual communion with God shall believe that death is to end it all. Christ's proof that immortal life was revealed in the Pentateuch, was the fact that God there called Himself the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob; by which our Lord meant us to learn that men who are brought into personal relations with God can never die, that it is impossible that a soul which has looked up to the face of the unseen Father with filial love should be left in the grave, or that those who are separated to be His, as He is theirs, should see corruption. The relation once established is eternal, and some more or less definite expectation of that eternity seems inseparable from the consciousness of the relation.

But be that as it may, and even taking the widest possible view of the contents of the patriarchal creed, what a rude outline it looks beside ours! Can there be anything in common between us? Can they be in any way a pattern for us? Yes; as I said, faith is one thing, creed is another. Joseph and his ancestors were joined to God by the very same bond which unites us to Him. There has never been but one path of life: 'They *trusted* God and were lightened, and their faces were not ashamed.' In that Old Covenant the one thing needful was trust in the living Jehovah. In the New, the one thing needful is the very same emotion, directed to the very same Lord, manifested now and incarnate in the divine Son, our Saviour. In this exercise of loving confidence, in which reason and will and affection blend in the highest energy and

Digitized by Google

holiest action, Joseph and we are one. Across the gulf of centuries we clasp hands; and in despite of all superficial differences of culture and civilisation, and all deeper differences in knowledge of God and His loving will, Pharaoh's prime minister, and the English workman, and the Hindoo ryot, may be alike in what is deepest—the faith which grasps God. How all that mysterious Egyptian life fades away as we think of the fundamental identity of religious emotion then and now! It disguises our brother from us, as it did from the wandering Arabs who came to buy corn, and could not recognise in the swarthy, imperious Egyptian, with strange head-dress and unknown emblems hanging by chains of gold about his neck, the fair boy whom they had sold to the merchants. But beneath it all is the brother's heart, fed by the same life-blood which feeds ours. He trusts in God, he expects a future because God has promised it, and, therefore, he is separated from those among whom he dwells, and knit to us in this far-off island of the sea, who so many centuries after are partakers of like precious faith.

And incomplete as his creed was, Joseph may have been a better Christian than some of us, and was so, if what he knew nourished his spiritual life more than what we know nourishes ours, and if his heart and will twined more tenaciously round the fragments of revelation which he possessed, and drew from them more support and strength than we do from the complete Gospel which we have.

Brethren, what makes us Christians is not the theology we have in our heads, but the faith and love we have in our hearts. We must, indeed, have a clear statement of truth in orderly propositions—that

Digitized by Google

is, a system of dogmas—to have anything to trust to at all. There can be no saving faith in an unseen Person, except through the medium of thoughts concerning Him, which thoughts put into words are a creed. The antithesis which is often eagerly urged upon us—not doctrines, but Christ—is a very incomplete and misleading one. 'Christ' is a mere name, empty of all significance till it is filled with definite statements of who and what Christ is. But whilst I, for my part, believe that we must have doctrines to make Christ a reality and an object of faith to grasp at all, I would urge all the more earnestly, because I thus believe, that, when we have these doctrines, it is not the creed that saves, but the faith. We are united to Christ, not by the doctrine of His nature and work, needful as that is, but by trusting in Him as that which the doctrine declares Him to be—Redeemer, Friend, Sacrifice, Divine Lover of our souls. Let us always remember that it is not the amount of religious knowledge which I have got, but the amount which I use, that determines my religious position and character. Most of us have in our creeds principles that have no influence upon our moral and active life; and, if so, it matters not one whit how pure, how accurate, how comprehensive, how consistent, how scriptural my conceptions of the Gospel may be. If they are not powers in my soul, they only increase my responsibility and my liability to condemnation. The dry light of the understanding is of no use to anybody. You must turn your creed into a faith before it has power to bless and save.

There are hosts of so-called Christians who get no more good out of the most solemn articles of their orthodox belief than if they were heathens. What is

Digitized by Google

the use of your saying that you believe in God the Father Almighty, when there is no child's love and happy confidence in your heart? What the better are you for believing in Jesus Christ, His divine nature, His death and glory, when you have no reliance on Him, nor any least flutter of trembling love towards Him? Is your belief in the Holy Ghost of the smallest consequence, if you do not yield to His hallowing power? What does it matter that you believe in the forgiveness of sins, so long as you do not care a rush whether yours are pardoned or no? And is it anything to you or to God that you believe in the life everlasting, if all your work, and hopes, and longings are confined to 'this bank and shoal of time'? Are you any more a Christian because of all that intellectual assent to these solemn verities? Is not your life like some secularised monastic chamber, with holy texts carved on the walls, and saintly images looking down from glowing windows on revellers and hucksters who defile its floor? Your faith, not your creed, determines your religion. Many a 'true believer' is a real 'infidel.'

Thank God that the soul may be wedded to Christ, even while a very partial conception of Christ is in the understanding. The more complete and adequate the creed, indeed, the mightier and more fruitful in blessing will the faith naturally be; and every portion of the full orb of the Sun of Righteousness which is eclipsed by the shadow of our intellectual misconceptions, will diminish the light and warmth which falls upon our souls. It is no part of our duty to pronounce what is the minimum of a creed which faith needs for its object. For myself, I confess that I do not understand how the spiritual life can be sustained in its

Digitized by Google

freshness and fervour, in its fulness and reality, without a belief in the divinity and saving work of Jesus Christ. But with that belief for the centre which faith grasps, the rest may vary indefinitely. All who stand around that centre, some nearer, some further off, some mazed in errors which others have cast behind them, some of them seeing and understanding more, and some less of Him and of His work —are His. He loves them, and will save them all. Knowledge varies. The faith which unites to God remains the same.

2. We may gather from this incident another consideration, namely, that *Faith has its noblest office in detaching from the present.*

All his life long, from the day of his captivity, Joseph was an Egyptian in outward seeming. He filled his place at Pharaoh's court, but his dying words open a window into his soul, and betray how little he had felt that he belonged to the order of things in the midst of which he had been content to live. This man, too, surrounded by an ancient civilisation, and dwelling among granite temples and solid pyramids and firm-based sphinxes, the very emblems of eternity, confessed that here he had no continuing city, but sought one to come. As truly as his ancestors who dwelt in tabernacles, like Abraham journeying with his camels and herds, and pitching his tent outside the walls of Hebron, like Isaac in the grassy plains of the South country, like Jacob keeping himself apart from the families of the land, their descendant, an heir with them of the same promise, showed that he too regarded himself as a 'stranger and a sojourner.' Dying, he said, 'Carry my bones up from hence.' Therefore we may be sure that, living, the hope of

Digitized by Google

the inheritance must have burned in his heart as a hidden light, and made him an alien everywhere but on its blessed soil.

And faith will always produce just such effects. In exact proportion to its strength, that living trust in God will direct our thoughts and desires to the 'King in His beauty, and the land that is very far off.' In proportion as our thoughts and desires are thus directed, they will be averted from what is round about us; and the more longingly our eyes are fixed on the furthest horizon, the less shall we see the flowers at our feet. To behold God pales the otherwise dazzling lustre of created brightness. They whose souls are fed with heavenly manna, and who have learned that it is their necessary food, will scent no dainties in the fleshpots of Egypt, for all their rank garlic and leeks. It is simply a question as to which of two classes of ideas occupies the thoughts, and which of two sets of affections engages the heart. If vulgar brawling and rude merrymakers fill the inn, there will be no room for the pilgrim thoughts which bear the Christ in their bosom, and have angels for their guard; and if these holy wayfarers enter, their serene presence will drive forth the noisy crowd, and turn the place into a temple. Nothing but Christian faith gives to the furthest future the solidity and definiteness which it must have, if it is to be a breakwater for us against the fluctuating sea of present cares and thoughts.

If the unseen is ever to rule in men's lives, it must be through their thoughts. It must become intelligible, clear, real. It must be brought out of the flickering moonlight of fancy and surmises, into the sunlight of certitude and knowledge. Dreams, and hopes, and peradventures are too unsubstantial stuff to be a bul-

Digitized by Google

wark against the very real, undeniable present. And such certitude is given through faith which grasps the promises of God, and twines the soul round the risen Saviour so closely that it sits with Him in heavenly places. Such certitude is given by faith alone.

If the unseen is ever to rule in men's lives, it must become not only an object for certain knowledge, but also for ardent wishes. The vague sense of possible evils lurking in its mysteries must be taken out of the soul, and there must come somehow an assurance that all it wraps in its folds is joy and peace. It must cease to be doubtful, and must seem infinitely desirable. Does anything but Christian faith engage the heart to love, and all the longing wishes to set towards, the things that are unseen and eternal? Where besides, then, can there be found a counterpoise weighty enough to heave up the souls that are laden with the material, and cleaving to the dust? Nowhere. The only possible deliverance from the tyrannous pressure of the trifles amidst which we live is in having the thoughts familiarised with Christ in heaven, which will dwarf all that is on earth, and in having the affections fixed on Him, which will emancipate them from the pains and sorrows that ever wait upon love of the mutable and finite creatures.

Let us remember that such deliverance from the present is the condition of all noble, joyous, pure life. It needs Christianity to effect it indeed, but it does not need Christianity to see how desirable it is, and how closely connected with whatever is lovely and of good report is this detachment from the near and the visible. A man that is living for remote objects is, in so far, a better man than one who is living for the present. He will become thereby the subject of a mental and moral

Digitized by Google

discipline that will do him good. And, on the other hand, a life which has no far-off light for its guiding star, has none of the unity, of the self-restraint, of the tension, of the conscious power which makes our days noble and strong. Whether he accomplish them or fail, whether they be high or low, the man who lets future objects rule present action is in advance of others. 'To scorn delights and live laborious days,' which is the prerogative of the man with a future, is always best. He is rather a beast than a man, who floats lazily on the warm, sunny wavelets as they lift him in their roll, and does not raise his head high enough above them to see and steer for the solid shore where they break. But only he has found the full, controlling, blessing, quickening power that lies in the thought of the future, and in life directed by it, to whom that future is all summed in the name of his Saviour. Whatever makes a man live in the past and in the future raises him; but high above all others stand those to whom the past is an apocalypse of God, with Calvary for its centre, and all the future is fellowship with Christ, and joy in the heavens. Having these hopes, it will be our own faults if we are not pure and gentle, calm in changes and sorrows, armed against frowning dangers, and proof against smiling temptations. They are our armour—'Put on the breastplate of faith . . . and for an helmet the hope of salvation.'

A very sharp test for us all lies in these thoughts. This change of the centre of interest from earth to heaven is the uniform effect of faith. What, then, of us? On Sundays we profess to seek for a city; but what about the week, from Monday morning to Saturday night? What difference does our faith make in the current of our lives? How far are they unlike—I

Digitized by Google

do not mean externally and in occupations, but in principle—the lives of men who 'have no hope'? Are you living for other objects than theirs? Are you nurturing other hopes in your hearts, as a man may guard a little spark of fire with both his hands, to light him amid the darkness and the howling storm? Do you care to detach yourself from the world? or are you really 'men of this world, which have their portion in this life,' even while Christians by profession? A question which I have no right to ask, and no power to answer but for myself; a question which it concerns your souls to ask and to answer very definitely for yourselves. There is no need to preach an exaggerated and impossible abstinence from work and enjoyment in the world where God has put us, or to set up a standard 'too high for mortal life beneath the sky.' Whatever call there may have sometimes been to protest against a false asceticism, and withdrawing from active life for the sake of one's personal salvation, times are changed now. What we want to-day is: 'Come ye out and be ye separate, and touch not the unclean thing.' In my conscience I believe that multitudes are having the very heart of the Christian life eaten out by absorption in earthly pursuits and loves, and by the effacing of all distinction in outward life, in occupation, in recreation, in tastes and habits, between people who call themselves Christians, and people who do not care at all whether there is another world or not. There can be but little strength in our faith if it does not compel us to separation. If it has any power to do anything at all, it will certainly do that. If we are naturalised as citizens there, we cannot help being aliens here. 'Abraham,' says the New Testament, 'dwelt in tabernacles, *for* he looked for a city.' Just

Digitized by Google

so! The tent life will always be the natural one for those who feel that their mother-country is beyond the stars. We should be like the wandering Swiss, who hear in a strange land the rude, old melody that used to echo among the Alpine pastures. The sweet, sad tones kindle home-sickness that will not let them rest. No matter where they are, or what they are doing, no matter what honour they have carved out for themselves with their swords, they throw off the livery of the alien king which they have worn, and turning their backs upon pomp and courts, seek the free air of the mountains, and find home better than a place by a foreign throne. Let us esteem the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt, and go forth to Him without the camp, for here have we no continuing city.

3. Again, we have here an instance that *Faith makes men energetic in the duties of the present.*

The remarks which I have been making must be completed by that consideration, or they become hurtful and one-sided. You know that common sarcasm, that Christianity degrades this present life by making it merely the portal to a better, and teaches men to think of it as only evil, to be scrambled through anyhow. I confess that I wish the sneer were a less striking contrast to what Christian people really think. But it is almost as gross a caricature of the teaching of Christianity as it is of the practice of Christians.

Take this story of Joseph as giving us a truer view of the effect on present action of faith in, and longing for, God's future. He was, as I said, a true Hebrew all his days. But that did not make him run away from Pharaoh's service. He lived by hope, and that

Digitized by Google

made him the better worker in the passing moment, and kept him tugging away all his life at the oar, administering the affairs of a kingdom.

Of course it is so. The one thing which saves this life from being contemptible is the thought of another. The more profoundly we feel the reality of the great eternity whither we are being drawn, the greater do all things here become. They are made less in their power to absorb or trouble, but they are made infinitely greater in importance as preparations for what is beyond. When they are first they are small, when they are second they are great. When the mist lifts, and shows the snowy summits of the 'mountains of God,' the nearer lower ranges, which we thought the highest, dwindle indeed, but gain in sublimity and meaning by the loftier peaks to which they lead up. Unless men and women live for eternity, they *are* 'merely players,' and all their busy days 'like a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, *signifying nothing*.' How absurd, how monotonous, how trivial it all is, all this fret and fume, all these dying joys and only less fleeting pains, all this mill-horse round of work which we pace, unless we are, mill-horse-like, driving a shaft that goes *through the wall*, and grinds something that falls into 'bags that wax not old' on the other side. The true Christian faith teaches us that this world is the workshop where God makes men, and the next, the palace where He shows them. All here is apprenticeship and training. It is of no more value than the attitudes into which gymnasts throw themselves, but as a discipline most precious. The end makes the means important; and if we believe that God is preparing us for immortal life with Him by all our work, then we shall do it with a will: otherwise

Digitized by Google

we may well be languid as we go on for thirty or forty years, some of us, doing the same trivial things, and getting nothing out of them but food, occupation of time, and a mechanical aptitude for doing what is not worth doing.

It is the horizon that gives dignity to the foreground. A picture without sky has no glory. This present, unless we see gleaming beyond it the eternal calm of the heavens, above the tossing tree-tops with withering leaves, and the smoky chimneys, is a poor thing for our eyes to gaze at, or our hearts to love, or our hands to toil on. But when we see that all paths lead to heaven, and that our eternity is affected by our acts in time, then it is blessed to gaze, it is possible to love, the earthly shadows of the uncreated beauty, it is worth while to work.

Remember, too, that faith will energise us for any sort of work, seeing that it raises all to one level and brings all under one sanction, and shows all as co-operating to one end. Look at that muster-roll of heroes of faith in the Epistle to the Hebrews, and mark the variety of grades of human life represented there—statesmen, soldiers, prophets, shepherds, widow women, martyrs—all fitted for their tasks and delivered from the snare that was in their calling, by that faith which raised them above the world, and therefore fitted them to come down on the world with stronger strokes of duty. This is the secret of doing with our might whatsoever our hand finds to do—to trust Christ, to live *with* Him, and *by* the hope of the inheritance.

Then, brethren, let us see that our clearer revelation bears fruit in a faith in the great divine promises as calm and firm as this dying patriarch had. Then the same power will work not only the same detachment

Digitized by Google

and energy in life, but the same calmness and solemn light of hope in death. It is very beautiful to notice how Joseph dying almost overleaps the thought of death as a very small matter. His brethren who stood by his bedside might well fear what might be the consequences to their people when the powerful protector, the prime minister of the kingdom, was gone. But the dying man has firm hold of God's promises, and he knows that these will be fulfilled, whether he live or no. 'I die,' says he, 'but God shall surely visit you. *He* is not going to die; and though I stand no more before Pharaoh, you will be safe.'

Thus we may contemplate our own going away, or the departure of the dearest from our homes, and of the most powerful for good in human affairs, and in the faith of God's true promises may feel that no one is indispensable to our well-being or to the world's good. God's chariot is self-moving. One after another, who lays his hand upon the ropes, and hauls for a little space, drops out of the ranks. But it will go on, and in His majesty He will ride prosperously.

And for himself, too, the dying man felt that death was a very small matter. 'Whether I live or die I shall have a share in the promise. Living, perhaps my feet would stand upon its soil; dying, my bones will rest there.' And we, who know a resurrection, have in it that which makes Joseph's fond fancy a reality, and reduces the importance of that last enemy to nothing. Some will be alive and remain till the coming of the Lord, some will be laid in the grave till His voice calls them forth, and carries their bones up from hence to the land of the inheritance. But whether we be of generations that fell on sleep looking for the promise of His coming, or whether of the

Digitized by Google

generation that go forth to meet Him when He comes, it matters not. All who have lived by faith will there be gathered at last. The brightest hopes of the present will be forgotten. Then, when we too shall stand in the latter day, wearing the likeness of His glory, and extricated wholly from the bondage of corruption and the dust of death, we, perfected in body, soul, and spirit, shall enter the calm home, where we shall change the solitude of the desert and the transitoriness of the tent and the dangers of the journey, for the society and the stability and the security of the city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

A COFFIN IN EGYPT

'They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.'—GENESIS l. 26.

So closes the book of Genesis. All its recorded dealings of God with Israel, and all the promises and the glories of the patriarchal line, end with 'a coffin in Egypt.' Such an ending is the more striking, when we remember that a space of three hundred years intervenes between the last events in Genesis and the first in Exodus, or almost as long a time as parts the Old Testament from the New. And, during all that period, Israel was left with a mummy and a hope. The elaborately embalmed body of Joseph lay in its gilded and pictured case, somewhere in Goshen, and was, no doubt, in the care of the Israelites, as is plain from the fact that they carried it with them at the exodus. For three centuries, that silent 'coffin in Egypt' preached its impressive messages. What did it say? It spoke,

Digitized by Google

no doubt, to ears often deaf, but still some faint whispers of its speechless testimony would sound in some hearts, and help to keep vivid some hopes.

First, it was a silent reminder of mortality. Egyptian consciousness was much occupied with death. The land was peopled with tombs. But the corpse of Joseph was perhaps not laid in one of these, but remained housed somewhere in sight, as it were, of all Israel. Many a passer-by would pause for a moment, and think: Here is the end of dignity second only to Pharaoh's, to this has come that strong brain, that true heart, Israel's pride and protection is shut up in that wooden case.

> 'The glories of our birth and state
> Are shadows, not substantial things;
> There is no armour against fate,
> Death lays his icy hand on kings.'

Yes, but let us remember that while that silent sarcophagus enforced the old, old lesson to the successive generations that looked on it and little heeded its stern, sad teaching of mortality, it had other brighter truths to tell. For the shrivelled, colourless lips that lay in it, covered with many a fold of linen, had left as their last utterance, 'I die, but God will surely visit you.' No man is necessary. Israel can survive the loss of the strongest and wisest. God lives, though a hundred Josephs die. It is pure gain to lose human helpers, if thereby we become more fully conscious of our need of a divine arm and heart, and more truly feel that we have these for our all-sufficient stay. Blessed is the fleeting of all that can pass, if its withdrawal lets the calm light of the Eternal, which cannot pass, stream in uninterrupted on us! When the leaves fall, we see

Digitized by Google

more clearly the rock which their short-lived greenness in its pride veiled. When the many-hued and ever-shifting clouds are swept out of the sky by the wind, the sun that lent them all their colour shines the more brightly. The message of every death-bed and grave is meant to be, 'This and that man dies, but God lives.' The last result of our contemplation of mortality, as affecting our dearest and most needful ones, and as sure to include ourselves in its far-reaching, close-woven net, ought to be to drive us to God's breast, that there we may find a Friend who does not pass, and may dwell in 'the land of the living,' on whose soil the foot of all-conquering Death dare never tread.

Nor are these thoughts all the message of that 'coffin in Egypt.' In the first verses of the next book, that of Exodus, there is a remarkable juxtaposition of ideas, when we read that 'Joseph died and all his brethren and all that generation.' But was that the end of Israel? By no means, for the narrative goes on immediately to say—linking the two things together by a simple 'and'—that 'the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied and waxed exceeding mighty.'

So life springs side by side with death. There are cradles as well as graves.

> 'The individual withers,
> And the race is more and more.'

Leaves drop and new leaves come. The April days are not darkened, and the tender green of the fresh leaf-buds is all the more vigorous and luxuriant, because it is fed from the decaying leaves that litter the roots of the long-lived oak. Thus through the ages the pathetic alternation goes on. Penelope's web is ever being woven and run down and woven again.

Digitized by Google

Joseph dies; Israel grows. Let us not take half-views, nor either fix our thoughts on the universal law of dissolution and decay, nor on the other side of the process—the universal emergence of life from death, reconstruction from dissolution. In our individual histories and on the wider field of the world's history, the same large law is at work, which is expressed in the simplest terms by these old words, 'Joseph died, and all his brethren and all that generation'—and 'the children of Israel were fruitful and increased abundantly.' So the wholesome lesson of mortality is stripped of much of its sadness, and retains all its pathos, solemnity, and power to purify the heart.

Again, that 'coffin in Egypt' was a herald of Hope. The reason for Joseph's dying injunction that his body should be preserved after the Egyptian fashion, and laid where it could be lifted and carried away, when the long-expected deliverance was effected, was the dying patriarch's firm confidence that, though he died, he had still somehow a share in God's faithful promise. We do not know the precise shape which his thought of that share took. It may have been merely the natural sentiment which desires that the unconscious frame shall moulder quietly beside the mouldering forms which once held our dear ones. This naturalised Egyptian did his work manfully in the land of his adoption, and flung himself eagerly into its interests, but his heart turned to the cave at Machpelah, and, though he lived in Egypt, he could not bear to think of lying there for ever when dead, especially of being left there alone. There may have been some trace in his wish of the peculiar Egyptian belief that the preservation of the body contributed

Digitized by Google

in some way to the continuance of personal life, and that a certain shadowy self hovered about the spot where the mummy was laid. Our knowledge of the large place filled by a doctrine of a future life in Egyptian thought makes it most probable that Joseph had at least some forecast of that hope of immortality, which seems to us to be inseparable from the consciousness of present communion with God.

But, in any case, Israel had charge of that coffin because the dead man that lay in it had, on the very edge of the gulf of death, believed that he had still a portion in Israel's hope, and that, when he had taken the plunge into the great darkness, he had not sunk below the reach of God's power to give him personal fulfilment of His yet unfulfilled promise. His dying command was the expression of his unshaken faith that, though he was dead, God would visit him with His salvation, and give him to see the prosperity of His chosen, that he might rejoice in the gladness of the nation, and glory with His inheritance. He had lived, trusting in God's bare promise, and, as he lived, he died. The Epistle to the Hebrews lays hold of the true motive power in the incident, when it points to Joseph's dying 'commandment concerning his bones' as a noble instance of Faith.

Thus, through slow creeping centuries, this silent preacher said—'Hope on, though the vision tarry, wait for it, for it will surely come. God is faithful, and will perform His word.' There was much to make hope faint. To bring Israel out of Canaan seemed a strange way of investing it with the possession of Canaan. As the tardy years trickled away, drop by drop, and the promise seemed no nearer fulfilment, some film of doubt must have crept over Hope's bright

Digitized by Google

eyes. When new dynasties reigned, and Israel slowly sank into the state of bondage, it must have been still harder to believe that the shortest road to the inheritance was round by Goshen. But through all the darkening course of Israel in these sad centuries, there stood the 'coffin,' the token of a triumphant faith which had leapt, as a trifle, over the barrier of death, and grasped as real the good which lay beyond that frowning wall. We have a better Herald of hope than a mummy-case and a pyramid built round it. We have an empty grave and an occupied Throne, by which to nourish our confidence in Immortality and our estimate of the insignificance of death. Our Joseph does not say—'I die, but God will surely visit you,' but He gives us the wonderful assurance of identification with Himself, and consequent participation in His glory—'Because I live, ye shall live also.' Therefore our hope should be as much brighter and more confirmed than this ancient one was as that on which it is based is better and more joyous. But, alas, there is no invariable proportion between food supplied and strength derived. An orchid can fling out gorgeous blooms, though it grows on a piece of dry wood, but plants set in rich soil often show poor flowers. Our hope will be worthy of its foundation, only on condition of our habitually reflecting on the firmness of that foundation, and cultivating familiarity with the things hoped for.

There are many ways in which the apostle's great saying that 'we are saved by hope' approves itself as true. Whatever leads us to grasp the future rather than the present, even if it is but an earthly future, and to live by hope rather than by fruition, even if it is but a short-reaching hope, lifts us in the scale of

Digitized by Google

being, ennobles, dignifies, and in some respects purifies us. Even men whose expectations have not wing-power enough to cross the dreadful ravine of Death, are elevated in the degree in which they work towards a distant goal. Short-sighted hopes are better than blind absorption in the present. Whatever puts the centre of gravity of our lives in the future is a gain, and most of all is that hope blessed, which bids us look forward to an eternal sitting with Jesus at the right hand of God.

If such hope has any solidity in it, it will certainly detach us from the order of things in which we dwell. The world is always tempting us to 'forget the imperial palace' whither we go. The Israelites must have been swayed by many inducements to settle down for good and all in the low levels of fertile Goshen, and to think themselves better off there than if going out on a perilous enterprise to win no richer pastures than they already possessed. In fact, when the deliverance came, it was not particularly welcome, even though oppression was embittering the peoples' lives. But, when hope had died down in them, and desire had become languid, and ignoble contentment with their flocks and herds had dulled their spirits, Joseph's silent coffin must have pealed in their ears—'This is not your rest; arise and claim your inheritance.' In like manner, the pressure of the apparently solid realities of to-day, the growth of the 'scientific' temper of mind which confines knowledge to physical facts, the drift of tendency among religious people to regard Christianity mainly in its aspect of dealing with social questions and bringing present good, powerfully reinforce our natural sluggishness of Hope, and have brought it about that the average Christian

Digitized by Google

of this day has fewer of his thoughts directed to the future life than his predecessors had, or than it is good for him to have.

Among the many truths which almost need to be rediscovered by their professed believers, that of the rest that remains for the people of God is one. For the test of believing a truth is its influence on conduct, and no one can affirm that the conduct of the average Christian of our times bears marks of being deeply influenced by that Future, or by the hope of winning it. Does he live as if he felt that he was an alien among the material things surrounding him? Does it look as if his true affinities were beyond the grave and above the stars? If we did thus feel, not at rare intervals, when 'in seasons of calm weather, our souls have sight of that immortal sea,' which lies glassy before the throne, and on whose banks the minstrels stand singing the song of Moses and of the Lamb, but habitually and with a vivid realisation, which makes the things hoped for more solid than what we touch and handle, our lives would be far other than they are. We should not work less, but more, earnestly at our present duties, whatever these may be, for they would be seen in new importance as bearing on our place in that world of consequences. The more our goal and prize are seen gleaming through the dust of the race-ground, the more strenuous our effort here. Nothing ennobles the trifles of our lives in time like the streaming in on these of the light of eternity. That vision ever present with us will not sadden. The fact of mortality is grim enough, if forced upon us unaccompanied by the other fact that Death opens the gate of our Home. But when the else depressing thought that 'here we have no continuing city' is but

Digitized by Google

the obverse and result of the fact that 'we seek one to come,' it is freed from its sadness, and becomes powerful for good and even for joy. We need, even more than Israel in its bondage did, to realise that we are strangers and pilgrims. It concerns the depth of our religion and the reality of our profiting by the discipline, as well as of our securing the enjoyment of the blessings, of the fleeting and else trivial present, that we shall keep very clear in view the great future which dignifies and interprets this enigmatical earthly life.

Further, that 'coffin in Egypt' was a preacher of patience. As we have seen, three centuries at least, probably a somewhat longer period, passed between the time when Joseph's corpse was laid in it, and the night when it was lifted out of it by the departing Israelites. No doubt, hope deferred had made many a heart sick, and the weary question, 'Where is the promise of His coming?' had in some cases changed into bitter disbelief that the promise would ever be fulfilled. But, for all these years, the dumb monitor stood there proclaiming, 'If the vision tarry, wait for it.'

Surely we need the same lesson. It is hard for us to acquiesce in the slow march of the divine purposes. Life is short, and desire would fain see the great harvests reaped before death seals our eyes. Sometimes the very prospect of the great things that shall one day be accomplished in the world, and we not there to see, weighs heavily on us. Reformers, philanthropists, idealists of all sorts are constitutionally impatient, and in their generous haste to see their ideals realised, forget that 'raw haste' is 'half-sister to delay,' and are indignant with man for his

Digitized by Google

sluggishness and with God for His majestic slowness. Not less do we fret and fume and think the days drag with intolerable slowness, before some eagerly expected good rises like a star on our individual lives. But there is deep truth in Paul's apparent paradox, that 'if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.' The more sure the confidence, the more quiet the patient waiting. It is uncertainty which makes earthly hope short of breath, and impatient of delay.

But since a Christian man's hope is consolidated into certainty, and when it is set on God, cannot only say, I trust that it will be so and so, but, I know that it shall, it may well be content to be patient for the fulfilment, 'as the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it.' 'One day is with the Lord as a thousand years,' in respect of the magnitude of the changes which may be wrought by the instantaneous operation of His hand when the appointed hour shall strike, and therefore it should not strain our patience nor stagger our faith that 'a thousand years' should be 'as one day,' in respect of the visible approximation achieved in them, towards the establishment of His purpose. The world was prepared for man through countless millenniums. Man was prepared for the advent of Christ through long centuries. Nineteen hundred years have effected comparatively little in incorporating the issues of Christ's work in the consciousness and characters of mankind. Much of the slowness of that progress of Christianity is due to the faithlessness and sloth of professing Christians. But it still remains true that God lifts His foot slowly, and plants it firmly, in His march through the world. So, both in

Digitized by Google

regard to the progress of truth, and the diffusion of the highest, and of the secondary, blessings of Christianity through the nations, and in respect to the reception of individual good gifts, we shall do wisely to leave God to settle the 'when,' since we are sure that He has bound Himself to accomplish the fact.

Finally, that 'coffin in Egypt' was a pledge of possession. It lay long among the Israelites to uphold fainting faith, and at last was carried up before their host, and reverently guarded during forty years' wanderings, till it was deposited in the cave at Machpelah, beside the tombs of the fathers of the nation. Thus it became to the nation, and remains for us, a symbol of the truth that no hope based upon God's bare word is ever finally disappointed. From all other anticipations grounded on anything less solid, the element of uncertainty is inseparable, and Fear is ever the sister of Hope. With keen insight Spenser makes these two march side by side, in his wonderful procession of the attendants of earthly Love. There is always a lurking sadness in Hope's smiles, and a nameless dread in her eyes. And all expectations busied with or based upon the contingencies of this poor life, whether they are fulfilled or disappointed, prove less sweet in fruition than in prospect, and often turn to ashes in the eating, instead of the sweet bread which we had thought them to be. One basis alone is sure, and that is the foundation on which Joseph rested and risked everything—the plain promise of God. He who builds on that rock will never be put to shame, and when floods sweep away every refuge built on sand, he will not need to 'make haste' to find, amid darkness and storm, some less precarious shelter, but will look down serenely on the

Digitized by Google

wildest torrent, and know it to be impotent to wash away his fortress home.

There is no nobler example of victorious faith which prolonged confident expectation beyond the insignificant accident of death than Joseph's dying 'commandment concerning his bones.' His confidence, indeed, grasped a far lower blessing than ours should reach out to clasp. It was evoked by less clear and full promises and pledges than we have. The magnitude and loftiness of the Christian hope of Immortality, and the certitude of the fact on which it reposes, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, should result in a corresponding increase in the firmness and clearness of our hope, and in its power in our lives. The average Christian of to-day may well be sent to school to Joseph on his death-bed. Is our faith as strong as—I will not ask if it is stronger than—that of this man who, in the morning twilight of revelation, and with a hope of an eternal possession of an earthly inheritance, which, one might have thought, would be shattered by death, was able to fling his anchor clean across the gulf when he gave injunction, 'Carry my bones up hence'? We have a better inheritance, and fuller, clearer promises and facts on which to trust. Shame to us if we have a feebler faith!

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

89094589199

b89094589199a

This book may be kept

FOURTEEN DAYS

Digitized by Google



Digitized by Google

B89094589199
B89094589199A